



ようこそ
実力至上主義
の**教室**へ

ようこそ
じつりよく
しじょうしゆぎ
のきょうしつへ



衣笠彰梧
KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセシュンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU

7.5

Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi no
Kyoushitsu e

Welcome to the Classroom of the Know-It-Alls

vol.7.5

by Kinugasa Syohgo

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衣笠彰梧 ~~×~~
トモセシュンサク



あやのこうじ きよ たか
綾小路清隆

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Prologue: My First Winter

Outside, even as morning came, snow continued to fall. The 25th. The world was right in the midst of Christmas. Around the world, all over, will be overflowing with people spending time with precious family members or lovers. Even in this school, even though it's only a few, there are lovers like that too.

As the promised time drew closer, I get my body ready.

".....it's already been more than 8 months huh?"

The passage of time ever since I enrolled in this school, is really fast. I wonder if it means that I enjoyed this school just that much. As I opened up the window that leads to the veranda slightly, a cold wind blew in. At the same time as that, the laughing voices of girls also came into my room. It seems from now, they will be heading over to Keyaki Mall to play.

"I should head out soon too".

As I noticed it was already past 11:30, I shut the window. Today is the day of my promised date with Satou Maya.

In this one day, whether something will change or not.....is something I don't know. But at the very least, I believe this one day will be a significant one for me. If not, I wouldn't even think of going on a date. To fall in love with someone. To think of someone as precious to you. Just by spending time with each other, to share happiness with one another. They become an irreplaceable existence to you. Those sorts of feelings and events, I wonder if I will be able to experience them too.

This small story of the winter vacation, the curtains open on the night of the 23rd before Christmas Eve

Chapter 1: The Arrow of Love

Part 1

The 23rd of December. Clear skies. Waking up in the morning was extremely pleasant. It was almost unbelievably refreshing, and even though I had just gotten up. I was wrapped up in comfort and it felt as though I were still in a dream.

It was the first change that occurred to me. So, what changed? If people ask me that, I would resolutely answer 'No'. But, it's not like nothing's changed. The truth is, there had been a change. A dramatic change. I, Karuizawa Kei, no longer have a horrible past chaining me down.

To be more precise, it's not quite that. I have gained a power that won't lose to the past chaining me down. That is, yesterday, the events of the closing ceremony that ended the second semester. I was called out by Ryuen and the others, and received acts of bullying. It sounds lame when I put it to words like this but it is a fact that it happened. I hit rock bottom.

At this school I ran away to seeking salvation, I thought I would once again be dropped down into hell. And then, I heard various things. And amongst those, the shocking one was, that Manabe and the others who bullied me were in fact guided by Kiyotaka. At first I despaired, and even anger came out. But.....in the end I was saved.

By the hands of Kiyotaka. The ones waiting for me as I safely descended from the rooftop were the former student council president and Chabashira-sensei. It wasn't like they had anything to say to me, it was just their concern so that the eyes of unrelated people would not fall on me. Honestly, without their care, I doubt I would have safely made it back to the dormitory.

The only thing they told me was that those two were acting based on Kiyotaka's instructions. I think it's because they realized it was the only way to calm me down. Those events on the rooftop. The seeds that the me who was

bullied by Manabe and the others had planted. If I had the power to shake off my past, I would have been more resolute then. It would have ended without what happened back in middle school being found out.....no, that's not it. Basically, I was in the wrong. To act tough, I continued to take on an arrogant attitude.

Towards that, even if Manabe and the others feel displeasure it couldn't be helped. It was a method I chose to avoid bullying. And the demerits of that.

"Fuu.....".

A sigh like that came out. But it's not a bad sigh at all. How should I put it? It was a sigh filled with emotion, no. I can't really put it into words well.

There's only one thing I'm certain about. That is, even when I'm asleep, even when I'm awake. Inside my thoughts, Kiyotaka is always there.

Ever since yesterday, it was burned into my mind and I couldn't part from it.

"...more like, mou, how should I put it, this is foul play.....".

Even though my body temperature should be normal, for some reason, my body became hot. To suppress the amount of heat in my body, I closed my eyes. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. 1st year Class D. At first I didn't even think anything of him. Just a classmate without a shadow. Sometimes the topic of him being cool did arise, but I was never interested. And besides, those classmates soon forgot about Kiyotaka.

In our modern world, communication skills are a large factor in one's popularity. That is something that is fundamentally lacking in Kiyotaka. No matter how good he is at sports, if it's not accompanied by other elements, the degree of his popularity will not extend any further. That's why with Yousuke-kun in the lead too, Class A's Tsukasaki-kun and Class B's Shibata-kun are more popular by an order of magnitude.

But the real Kiyotaka is not bad at socializing, he's really smart, he's very mature, he's very rational, he's also good at sports to the point he won't lose even to the senior students, and also, he's strong to the point it's almost unbelievable.....there are also ruthless and cruel parts to him, but.....even so, in the end, he'll save me.

"Haa.....!?".

Could it be, I, before I knew it, about Kiyotaka---

"No, no, no, no. No way, no way!".

Holding my face which had become red, I shake my head intensely left and right. As my face became red, I panicked.....I'm almost like a maiden in love.

It's not like I'm denying romance. I'm also a girl who wants to properly fall in love too. But, how should I put it, there's a part of me that cannot admit that I'm looking at Kiyotaka with those eyes.

"That's right. It obviously can't be the case. It's because of him that I experienced terrible things.....".

On the contrary, I'd like him to thank me for not holding a grudge against him. On top of that, to steal my heart away too, I cannot forgive such indulgency.

Standing in front of the mirror, I combed my hair which had become frizzled after waking up.

"But, I'm also too much of a good person, aren't I?".

Even if they happened to bear the fault, I wonder if an ordinary person would forgive Kiyotaka for what he did? Probably impossible. It's obvious that it'd be impossible. On the contrary, they would probably hold a grudge against him. It's only because it happened to be a deeply generous person like me that he was forgiven. Just be satisfied with that, Kiyotaka. Speaking out loud like that in my head, I shook off those wrongful delusions.

It's just, I cannot breach the subject of having forgiven him already in front of Kiyotaka.

On the contrary, I wonder if I should go bother him a bit. Pretending to be angry at him a bit for having been manipulated sounds good, after all. And also probably, the next time I see Kiyotaka's face, true anger might actually emerge too.

As I was mulling over that, a chat arrived on my phone.

"Today at 11 o'clock, thanks in advance Karuizawa-san".

"Ahh, I see. There was that".

It was a contact from my classmate, Satou Maya-san. Before tomorrow, the 24th, as a notice today, I received a contact from Satou-san telling me she wanted to meet me as she had something to consult me about.

Normally, because I got along with a different group from that of Satou-san, our exchanges were by no means, deep.

Of course, as classmates, we do get along fairly well, but it's the first time I've been called out like this to meet with her.

"But even so, I sure am healthy".

Yesterday, underneath the cold sky, from the top of my head I had countless buckets of water dumped on me and even though such a horrible thing happened, I'm still perfectly healthy to the point I'd like to praise myself for it.

Naturally, after being chilled down to my core I took a bath to warm myself up, but a normal girl probably would've caught a cold and even if they slept for three days straight it wouldn't be strange.

"It's because I'm too used to such treatment.....just kidding".

I realized that sort of masochistic talk smoothly come out. The 'me' up until yesterday. That is, the 'me' that had thought she had changed but in fact had not changed at all.

I was always terrified of being bullied, always cowering. Deep inside my heart, a darkness had always been spreading out. But now, I can say it clearly. I wonder if I was able to change even a slight bit. Taking off my pajamas, and now in my underwear. At that moment, the scars carved into my white body inevitably came into sight. Even if I didn't want that, I would end up seeing it. Every day, I confronted these scars, my feelings sank and I started to want to die. But, I never minded them as much as I did yesterday.

Even though I hated that scar that much, regretted that much and felt that much sadness. In just one day, I can't even believe I would change this much.

"But even so, I can't show this to a boy.....".

If they happened to see such a scar, the opposite sex would end up drawing away. The body of a girl is supposed to be soft and fluffy and beautiful.....This would end up crushing that illusion.

I'm sure even a hundred years worth of love would cool off. No, I had no intention of showing it to anyone else though.....I stored it away in my heart like that. It's just.....I might have not shown it on my expression.....but, Kiyotaka was different

Even though he saw this scar of mine, he never even once spoke his disgust. Is it just that he didn't say it? Or was it just because it was dark on board the ship? Or just lying? Did he think deep inside that it was disgusting? Or could it be he really did not think it was disgusting at all? Affirmations and repudiations repeat inside my head. But there was no way an answer could be found for that. Just repeating my soliloquy, I realized something important.

"Speaking of which that guy, he touched my body with his hands didn't he?"

Back then, I didn't have time to think, but isn't this a splendidly unbelievable thing? He touched my thighs, my uniform was almost taken off.....I was treated like a germ or a pest by the girls, and I was not protected by the boys either. The whole class, the whole school year, did not even see me as a human, much less see me as a girl. Even though I've never even properly held hands with a boy before, what the hell has he done to me I wonder.

"Really, mou, mou, mou! I'm thinking about it again! I'm such an idiot!"

Once again, let's put a lid on the matter of Kiyotaka and seal it away. I'll do that. That was just an accident so I have to forget about it. I passed my hands through the cloth and smoothly proceeded with changing.

Having taken some time to prepare, I headed towards the destination with a trot. The Keyaki Mall that welcomed the winter vacation was overflowing with students. Most of the students seem to have come here to play, as there were far more people than the usual holidays.

"I guess that's true. There's nowhere else to play but here".

All the necessities have been gathered here so I have no complaints but there's no novelty here.

Having somehow made it in time, called out to the Satou-san who was waiting with her phone in hand in front of the cafe that was our meeting spot.

"Good morning, Satou-san".

"Ahh, Karuizawa-san! Good morning!".

Satou-san's eyes lit up as she waved her hands at me. Perhaps she went to the hairdresser but her hair was beautifully arranged. Just with that alone, I ended up imagining various things.

It was yesterday night that Satou-san called me asking for consultation. Both my mind and body were worn out, but I kept quiet about that fact. Of course I would. The fact that I was called up to the rooftop and showered in cold water was something that 'never happened' as far as anyone's concerned. In other words, looking at it from Satou-san's perspective, I have to be the usual me. That's why although I could have turned down the consultation request, I decided to accept it. And besides.....since a while ago I've been curious about Satou-san's actions.

"Sorry, for calling you out suddenly".

"It's no big deal. Don't worry about it".

"It's a great help to me if you say that".

Together with Satou-san, who seemed happy, as planned we entered the shop. Although it was full, conveniently a pair happened to be leaving too in exchange so we were able to properly enter.

"It's really crowded~".

I said that out loud without thinking. It was exasperatingly successful.

"In the winter vacation, I wonder if all the school years don't have anything like exams".

Towards the Satou-san who said that, I too, had the same question.

During the summer vacation, we 1st year students immediately set out on a voyage on board a luxury cruiser. But, this time, from seeing students across all

school years, it seems as though no special exams were being conducted.

I wonder if this school, too, is giving us this service at least for the winter vacation. Or could it be that at the end of this year and the start of the next, some kind of exam would begin? If so, I'd hate it.

"If you haven't eaten breakfast yet, order lots and lots ok? I'll pay for everything".

Satou-san tells me not to hold back with a smile. And just as she said, I ordered an American scone and a cafe au lait, and the two of us, near the center of the shop, sat in a small table for two.

"So what's the consultation you wanted from me?".

A consultation that she'd go as far as to buy me a meal, I wonder if it's going to be a significant request. Correcting my posture slightly, I leaned in with my ears.

"Hmm, yeah. The thing is, you see? The truth is.....soon I'll be going on a date".

Satou said then cut in with that.

".....date?".

Even as I was surprised, I suppressed my tension and asked in return.

"That's right".

While blushing, Satou-san nodded two or three times towards me. I felt a bad premonition, as expected I've hit the mark. And her partner, if I'm not misreading this, is.

"Umm, with who?".

It seems Satou-san's been waiting for me to ask her that.

"It's Ayanokouji-kun, you see. It's a surprise.....right?".

Satou-san murmured that, seemingly shy yet happy. Suddenly, I could feel a

light tinnitus in my ears, but I pretended to be calm.

Taking the scone I had just received into my hands, I bit off a larger bite than usual. A fragment broke off and fell onto the tray. I then poured the cafe au lait into my mouth which had become dry.

"Heh.....so Satou-san's aiming for Ayanokouji-kun. That's a surprise~".

Of course I had realized that Satou-san had fallen in love with Kiyotaka. But, as since she's never consulted me directly before, answering like that was the safest.

"Right? I'm also a bit surprised by myself too. But, during the sports festival, there was the relay, right? Looking at his running figure, my heart was pounding, you see".

Satou-san was speaking with such excitement to the point I felt embarrassed while listening to it.

That figure of hers was indeed that of a 'Maiden in Love'.

"But, doesn't he lack a presence? If it's Satou-san, there should be other, better boys more suited for you. Like, Tsukasaki-kun from the other class, how about him?".

Even across our school year, he was hailed for a period of time as a considerably handsome guy.

He's been a hot topic recently, how about him? I recommended that to her like that.

"That's no good. It seems only a while ago, he's begun dating a senior student who attends the same club as him".

I see. So he's already been taken, that's why I haven't heard any rumors about him. Even a popular idol on the television, male and female alike, as soon as they find themselves a lover, their popularity plummets.

"So that's how it is. Then, how about Satonaka-kun? He should be free even now, right?".

"Yeah, I do think he's cool but.....something's just not clicking with me there".

Even though I suggested several other popular guys, Satou-san showed no signs of being moved at all. It seems Satou-san isn't judging Kiyotaka solely by his outer appearance. Really, at this rate it's almost like I'm saying Kiyotaka's outer appearance is inferior to that of Doujou-kun or Satonaka-kun.....right now he doesn't stand out much but if you compete only by outer appearance alone, without a doubt Kiyotaka is top class.

In other words, Satou-san, who's fallen in love, has realized that fact, huh.....For boys and for girls alike, the outer appearance of their partner is their status. I'm going out with such a cool boy, I'm going out with such a cute girl, just with that alone one's personal evaluation will also rise. Just as I had gained more than I had imagined from going out with Hirata-kun. With this timing, if Satou-san were to go out with Kiyotaka, at this point, Satou-san's evaluation might also rise too.

If Kiyotaka shows off his talent and starts standing out, than in itself would make his evaluation even higher than that of Hirata-kun. Kiyotaka's been gathering more attention ever since the relay but the current situation is, he's not gathering the attention of as many girls as expected. The expression of him normally having a quiet attitude and talking only with Horikita-san, those factors don't quite connect to the boom of the girls.

Next, like Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun, and Sudou-kun. Hanging out with friends like that who are seen in an exceedingly bad light by the girls is also a minus impression.

In any case, up until now Satou-san shouldn't have had that much contact with Kiyotaka. But despite that, falling in love with him and all that after just one act in the relay, isn't it a bit too shallow? I know Kiyotaka much more than her. His true nature, or more precisely, his deep, dark nature. Satou-san should have no idea about that. Ahh, mou. This is wrong, this is wrong! That has nothing to do with this. I have no reason to speak badly of Satou-san, and I'm in a position where I have to cheer her on.

Why? Because I am Hirata Yousuke's girlfriend. Because I have no reason to

interfere with someone else's romance. That is why I, as Hirata-kun's girlfriend, as the leader-like existence of the girls of Class D, I cut in to Satou-san.

"Hearing this may seem a bit like that but, are you seriously aiming for him that much?".

If I didn't know about Kiyotaka's identity, undoubtedly I would have asked something like that.

".....yeah".

In response to that question, Satou-san without any hesitation, answered with a nod. It seems she's hardened her resolve, and Satou-san was not approaching Kiyotaka as some joke. Such a thing, I had already long realized it though.

"Isn't it a good thing that you've found someone you like? And besides, right now Ayanokouji-kun should be free too".

"That's right, that's why I thought this might be my chance. If some other girl also falls in love with Ayanokouji-kun then.....I was thinking like that and I got into a hurry".

If one consults a friend or a best friend regarding romance, there are fifty thousand episodes in this world of having the boy they like be stolen away. It's not a strange thing that Satou-san is being cautious of that. As for me who has a boyfriend that's competing for 1st or 2nd place in our school year, I would have assessed the risk of that happening being as low as possible.

But even so, to think it would even come to a date during the winter vacation, this was beyond my expectations. That Kiyotaka, even though he didn't seem interested in Satou-san, even though the rooftop incident happened he still agreed to go out with her. The paper bag containing the straws, I unconsciously ended up tearing it apart.

".....could it be the consultation, has something to do with that date?".

Hearing that, Satou-san's eyes lit up and she nodded. Ever since a while ago, she's been too dazzling.

"Yeah. You know, like the secret behind making a date a success? I was wondering how I should do it. How did you end up dating Hirata-kun, I want you to tell me various things regarding that".

In Class D, the only ones who have clearly announced their relationship were me and Yousuke-kun. Even if she sought help from her friends in the other classes, Kiyotaka, or rather Ayanokouji, who's that? Something like that is the most that could happen. In other words, Satou-san relying on me is also something that couldn't be helped.

"Karuizawa-san, you started dating Hirata-kun soon after you enrolled right?".

"Yeah. I guess so. It's nothing special though".

"It is something special. It's really amazing, I really respect you for that!".

Saying that, Satou-san, almost as if engulfing both my hands, grasped them.

"That is why that skill, please instruct me in it!".

"It's not something that can be called a skill though.....".

In the first place, I cannot answer a single one of Satou-san's requests. The me who escaped from the ugly bullying of my middle school period approached him, having resolved to switch over from the bullied side to the side where I would not be bullied. Looking back on it, I was very lucky.

It was also an act that stemmed from determining that Yousuke-kun was not that kind of person but it really was a high-stakes gamble. If, when I had asked him to let me take on the false girlfriend role, and he had refused me, the result would have been something different from what it is now. And not just harshly dumping me, he might have even exposed my bullied past to everyone. Yousuke-kun is someone who treasures harmony from the bottom of his heart, and is the type of person to make it into an ideal.

Feeling like he could save me by pretending to be my boyfriend, he gladly accepted it. That's why I accepted him, and chose to be protected under that umbrella of peace. The girlfriend of Yousuke-kun, who's the center of the class. That title was far more effective than I had imagined. At first, there was envy and grudges coming from the girls of the class, but that too, soon disappeared.

Remembering what was done to me, I took a high-pressure attitude towards various students. Even in shopping, pestering for small change, things like that I traced them all.

And so, I was able to make the throne of the leader of Class D's girls my own.

But, the me who created a false status, clearly have things I can do and things I cannot do. That is why, even if Satou-san requests a romance lecture from me, there's nothing I can do to answer.

For someone without any experience in romance, there's no way they would know the techniques of romance. Since we were dating, to make the fact that we are "dating" common knowledge, we repeatedly went on pretend dates, but my heart was not there.

That's why I don't know what is right and what is wrong now. But I don't want to betray Satou-san's expectations. I don't want her to think I'm a newcomer to romance. If it were me from a while back, I would have probably boldly shown off the knowledge I heard from magazines or the television. Almost as if it were a date I had experienced, I would have been able to talkatively speak about it by replacing it with me.

But, now it's gradually changing. Towards Satou-san, towards someone who's placed their trust in me, I don't want to make random statements like that. Recently, I had grown tired of the me who had been acting bullishly and arrogantly, for a moment, I wanted to talk about something true. But I cannot breathe a word about that. In this school, I have to remain Yousuke-kun's girlfriend and act boldly. That is why I have to continue to tell lies I don't want to tell.

Do I really mean that?

Right now, is Yousuke-kun's existence still truly necessary to me?

At a time like this, unnecessary thoughts like that were floating into my mind. The only dangerous elements to me at present, Manabe and Ryuen's group, have been eliminated thanks to Kiyotaka's strategy (?). In other words, the story of the bullying will not come forth anymore. And besides, from now on, even if something were to happen, Kiyotaka will surely come and save me, I have that sense of safety too.

The fact that I'm Yousuke-kun's girlfriend is a lump of privileges but if I remove that, I wonder if there is the possibility of having my status in this school robbed from me. Of course, if it becomes a matter of having been dumped by Yousuke-kun more or less that might be lame, but I feel like depending on the 2 of us talking it out, it will go well.

If that happens, things will clear up for me and I will become free. And if I become free, I can finally pursue my true love. In other words, I cannot afford to be thinking such things now. Because the Satou-san in front of me is expecting a good answer from me while waiting. I can contemplate the meaning of continuing to go out with Yousuke-kun later.

The unnecessary thoughts that have disturbed me countless times, this time, I will drive them into a corner.

"After hearing you out what I thought is, instead of going on a trial date, Satou-san wants to go on a real date with Ayanokouji-kun with the intention of going out with him, right?".

"Yeah".

In other words, a date meant to seduce Kiyotaka.

"What should I do to make it go well?".

"Let's see!.....".

Let's think seriously. A way for Satou-san to go out with Kiyotaka.....umm, that guy, I wonder what needs to be done to seduce him.

He's an existence that's clearly divided from other men. I wonder if he'll be interested in ordinary romance.....or perhaps, he might surprisingly be the sort of guy that longs for that sort of ordinary romance?

Since it can be taken either way, making a judgment on this is a difficult task. As such questions floated up and disappeared repeatedly in me, Satou-san brought out a phone.

"I wonder if I was being too vague? Umm, you see, since I'm an amateur at this, I'd like to think of a date plan. Please help me with the decision".

And while lowering her head, she shows me the date plan written on the

phone's memo screen.

Meet at 12 o'clock -> Lunch -> Movie Theater -> Shopping -> Confession underneath the Legendary Tree -> Present

It seems overwhelmingly simple, but it was written like that. Firstly, I interjected with the thing I was most concerned about over everything else.

"Wait a minute. Are you planning on confessing to him on the first date?"

"I was thinking of going with the whole intention of hitting and breaking.....only if the courage comes out on that day though".

As I was thinking she should deepen her relationship with him more bit by bit, she went in with a short-term decisive battle that was far beyond my expectations.

"Isn't it going too fast? I think it's not too late if you do it after 2, 3 dates. You might be able to realize some disagreeable aspects about your partner too".

Of course, girls with romantic experiences sometimes seem to make decisions on the spot too. But Satou-san, in regards to romance, seems to be closer to a beginner, I think it's better for her to take it slowly.

But, there's not much credibility in that coming from a fellow beginner like me.....But she seems rushed about the result, or more like I felt as though she were prioritizing her charm.

Could it be, Satou-san might possibly want to make her girlfriend debut in the 3rd semester.

"And also, what does this underneath the legendary tree mean? By any chance, is it one of those if you swear your love you'll be bound forevermore things?"

I wonder if such an urban legend steeped tree exists in this school. Even if such a mysterious power exists, in this day and age where one cannot see their future, being guaranteed to be bound together for 10 years or 20 years cannot be said only to be a good thing.

If it turns out that the man you've married is a useless one to the point you

want to divorce him, being forced to be married to him for life seems more like a curse. "It doesn't seem like it's that famous though, I found it while looking through the school's bulletin board. That, if you confess in front of that tree, it will definitely succeed. And what's more, there are quite a lot of reports like that".

Heh.....I didn't know about that. Since I've also become interested in that, I'll be investigating it.

And when I did, it seems it really does exist, in the school's chatroom bulletin board, there were several cases where a confession went well that were written there. It seems when this school was first founded, some big shot donated it and it was transplanted here. It seems the age of that tree exceeds 8 years.

"Speaking of which, there were several excellent trees like that weren't there.....".

Normally I wouldn't even be conscious of such a tree. The time of confession has to be in the evening before the sun sets. From 4 o'clock in the evening to 5 o'clock in the evening. Around that time, the condition is that no one else must be around. If that condition is fulfilled, the confession has a 99% chance of succeeding, it seems.

It did say 99%, but it's in an extremely fishy place.

"But even so, isn't it quite difficult? The timing of this confession".

"That's right, I guess. It says if someone else unrelated is there at the moment of confession, things won't go well".

In this time period, the presence of people is quite intense so the timing seems difficult. On top of that, it wouldn't be strange too if there were other boys and girls attempting to execute this legend.

One would have to connect the conversation well, and guide it so that only the 2 of you would be left. Naturally, something like this is just a superstition, and I think of it as a superstition. But if it's to make a once-in-a-lifetime confession succeed, it's a feeling like grasping at straws. I too, if it comes to victory or defeat, would want to raise my possibilities even if it's only by 1%.

"Hey umm, what's your reason for falling in love with Ayanokouji-kun?".

"Ehh? Why are you asking?".

"No, sorry. It's because I don't know anything about Ayanokouji-kun, you see. I wanted to get an image of him. About what part of him you fell in love with, like that. You know, if hear it, maybe it might be useful for my advice about your date plan, right?".

As I asked her that, Satou-san whispers back while hiding her cheeks inside her hands, looking shy.

"Umm---.....first of all, isn't he cool? Normally he's quiet and mature. And also, he runs very fast.....and in the tests too, he was above me so it's not like he's an idiot.....you know, I naturally think Hirata-kun is better than that but the other boys are all mostly childish".

She's probably talking about Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun and the others. Regarding that point, I'm also convinced. To the point I can't even believe we're the same age. Most of our male classmates are like children. That's why around this period, a large majority of girls become disillusioned with their classmates and go running towards their seniors.

"T-The things I'm saying right now, keep it a secret from the other girls, ok? It'll be bad if they also realize how fine Ayanokouji-kun is. Besides, it'll also sound lame if rumors about me not being used to men were to be spread around".

"Is it fine to consult me though?".

"Karuizawa-san's the girlfriend of Hirata-kun so that gives me peace of mind".

It seems Hirata-kun's existence is a huge one. Satou-san is relying on me. It doesn't feel too bad that she's relying on me to this point.....but of all things, why does it have to be about Kiyotaka?

If this were about some other boy, I could have supported her with my honest feelings. I wouldn't have felt this bothered inside my heart. Is this what they call fate?

"Hah.....".

It ended up sighing all of a sudden. Different from the one in the morning, a heavy one. But having heard that, Satou-san's face became gloomy as I looked at her.

"A-As I thought, I'm not bothering you, am I?".

"No, sorry. That sigh just now really didn't mean anything like that. Really".

I panicked and denied it, but inside my heart, I had been carrying that tone the whole time.....it's not like I'm in love with Kiyotaka or anything though. It's just, how should I put it, I have a special relationship with him. No matter what, that will always take precedence. But right now I need to overturn my thoughts and act for Satou-san's sake. I answer like that to myself many times over.

"Then, let's revise the date plan a little, shall we? If you're going to be eating lunch together, it might be better if you do it after watching the movie. If things get awkward, you can always talk about the movie that way".

"Umm, let me put down the plan Karuizawa-san thought up".

Saying that honestly, Satou-san took out her phone.

The movie is probably already booked but for the sake of the flow it's better if he does it. Watching a movie right away after eating may cause you trouble if an unforeseen situation were to arise. And it'll also make you sleepy so that's a NG.

I accessed the movie theater's HP.

"And? When's the all-important date going to happen?".

First of all, I need to check whether or not the time can be changed, if I don't start by confirming that nothing will start.

"It's the day after tomorrow".

"I see that's fine.....wait, the day after tomorrow's the 25th though!".

I almost stood up without thinking. I panickedly lowered my raised hips back onto the chair.

"Hehehe".

No, don't 'Hehehe' me.....!

The 25th of December. It's the 1 day that's most precious for men and women alike throughout the entire year. That Kiyotaka, giving the ok for a date on that 25th, what the hell is he thinking?

Normally it's supposed to be the time lovers spend together to further deepen their relationships, and a day to confirm their love. It's not suited towards starting a relationship. It's not normal to use such a day for a date. Should have gently declined and moved the date to the 26th.

If this were reversed, there's no mistaking that he would've incurred a considerable amount of displeasure.

A boy who just wants to do lewd things, such a label should be stuck on him. I interjected fiercely like that inside my thoughts.

"Fu, fu".

".....what's wrong, Karuizawa-san?".

"No, nothing. Don't worry about it".

Why am I getting hot all on my own. For someone unrelated like me, no matter what day the 2 of them decide to have their date on, it's irrelevant. The concerned parties are free to decide. I should understand that. Ah mou, ever since a while ago, what's the matter with me?

I became violently angry, towards my own thoughts. I gave those mistaken thoughts a double slap in the face and forcibly sealed them away.

"The 25th huh.....well I guess it's still better than the Eve tomorrow".

The movie theater, too, seems as though it would be overwhelmingly packed more so on the Eve. They're probably going to spend the whole day together after watching the movie.

Even though a lot of couples make use of it, looking at it in terms of the whole school, only 10% to 20% would be couples. As long as one doesn't care about the time and the positioning of their seats, it's possible for them to go as many rounds as they want.

"About the movie, you watch it from 11:50 and it'll end around 13:30. So before 2 o'clock you have your meals and around 3 o'clock you leave the shop. After that, you adjust the time yourself and after 4 o'clock you confess. Something like that?"

The result of roughly adjusting the time, this is probably for the best.

Satou-san, too, doesn't seem to have any objections and she nodded satisfactorily.

"After that, I think it's also better if you reserve your lunch. You probably want to take the seats near the windows, right?"

Discounting lunch time, without a problem it can be done.

"And also, if you reserve your orders ahead of time, they also make you things that are not on the menu".

"So that's how it is, I didn't know about that.....as expected of Karuizawa-san".

If it's the day after tomorrow, that place too, will have good accommodation. Well, the truth is, it's great if the boy thinks of all these things though. This time, it's a stage for the sake of Satou-san's confession so this is fine too though.

It's just, I don't know whether this was the right answer or not. It sounds pathetic when I repeat it but I've never gone on a real date before.....

Part 2

I received such a consultation from Satou-san, and on the way back from the cafe. The two of us, while chatting away, headed towards the dormitory.

"This morning it piled up quite a bit but it seems from tomorrow onwards, it will be snowing even more".

Receiving such words from Satou-san, I looked around at the scenery surrounding me. Even though it had started to melt slightly, there were still

snow remnants scattered about. If this continues, it might even be snowing all year round.

Ahh---so it's snow. Speaking of which, it was about two years back. I pretended that some muddy snow was chocolate kakigori and stuffed it into my mouth. Nostalgically remembering those old memories, I recalled that. For some reason, I felt that was something from a long time ago.

"I wonder what was so enjoyable about doing something like that".

"Ehh?".

"Sorry, sorry. I was just talking to myself. Sorry about that".

Perhaps it's because the events of yesterday happened, but I always end up remembering that. And as I did, Satou-san's expression changed into a slightly hard one. I had thought it was because I had been talking to myself, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"The thing is, I wasn't able to say it earlier but there's one more thing I want to ask you".

"You've already started? So, don't hesitate to consult me".

I struck my chest with a 'don' and answered her like that.

"Thank you, Karuizawa-san. Umm, well, I'm happy I got to go on a date but.....".

Perhaps she's harboring some anxieties towards her important date, but Satou-san continued.

"Truth is, this is the first date I've ever gone on in my life....so, I don't know what I should do"

"You've never gone out with another boy before?".

Satou-san who looked embarrassed. Well, from the flow of our conversation, I did have a feeling that was the case but.....

I thought a modern, trendy girl like Satou-san would have done it earlier so

that was surprising.

"I'm only telling this because it's you, Karuizawa-san, ok? Soon I'll be a 2nd year high schooler and if I still haven't gone on a date, if I told anyone else I'd definitely be made fun of. That I'm too slow. As expected, Karuizawa-san thinks so too?".

"I-I guess so. You're a bit too slow. But doesn't it only mean that you haven't found someone you really liked? It can also mean that you're treasuring yourself".

"It makes me happy you'd say that". While deceiving her like that, I followed up. Not to Satou-san but to myself.

"And you see? I think I'd be too nervous and won't be able to properly hold things. That's why including Karuizawa-san and Hirata-kun.....I was thinking if we could have a double date. To make sure things go well with me and Ayanokouji-kun, I want you to assist me!".

She requested me like that. Not able to comprehend the contents of the proposal, for a moment, I was thrown into confusion.

"D-Double date? A-Assist?"

"I should have really said this sooner, right? It's after I had various reservations about it".

Satou-san who apologizes with a sorry expression. Reservations like that end after a few minutes anyways so it's not a big problem. The important thing is, to me, in other words, an existence without romantic experience, she's requesting the role of Cupid in love. I wonder if something as absurd as this could even be.

"Is it.....impossible?".

"That's---".

Undoubtedly, I should decline. With the shallow knowledge I possess, mistakes will definitely be exposed. Ahh but, since this is also her first date for Satou-san maybe I can deceive her? Should I go formal here and pleasantly

acquiesce?

"As I thought, I think I'd like to spend Christmas alone together with Hirata-kun".

"Ehh?".

As I fretted over what to do, Satou-san again made an anxious face. I see. If it's ordinary lovers, a lot of them would be likely to spend tomorrow and the day after tomorrow together. If it were the usual me, I would have been able to discern that fact properly but my head was full of thoughts about the closing ceremony.

"Like Karuizawa-san and Hirata-kun, I also want to become an ideal couple".

Looking at it from the perspective of Satou-san who thinks I'm smoothly sailing through school life, this sort of request is neither strange nor distorted. But my heart was bothered. It doesn't have anything to do with Kiyotaka. It's not like I ever liked Yousuke-kun. And it's not like we were truly going out. A false couple.

But, as long as we continue to be a false couple. Neither me nor Yousuke-kun will be able to find true love.

Prologue

My First Winter.

Outside, even as morning came, snow continued to fall. The 25th. The world was right in the midst of Christmas. Around the world, all over, will be overflowing with people spending time with precious family members or lovers. Even in this school, even though it's only a few, there are lovers like that too.

As the promised time drew closer, I get my body ready.

".....it's already been more than 8 months huh?".

The passage of time ever since I enrolled in this school, is really fast. I wonder

if it means that I enjoyed this school just that much. As I opened up the window that leads to the veranda slightly, a cold wind blew in. At the same time as that, the laughing voices of girls also came into my room. It seems from now, they will be heading over to Keyaki Mall to play.

"I should head out soon too".

As I noticed it was already past 11:30, I shut the window. Today is the day of my promised date with Satou Maya.

In this one day, whether something will change or not.....is something I don't know. But at the very least, I believe this one day will be a significant one for me. If not, I wouldn't even think of going on a date. To fall in love with someone. To think of someone as precious to you. Just by spending time with each other, to share happiness with one another. They become an irreplaceable existence to you. Those sorts of feelings and events, I wonder if I will be able to experience them too.

This small story of the winter vacation, the curtains open on the night of the 23rd before Christmas Eve.

Chapter 1: The Arrow of Love.

The 23rd of December. Clear skies. Waking up in the morning was extremely pleasant. It was almost unbelievably refreshing, and even though I had just gotten up. I was wrapped up in comfort and it felt as though I were still in a dream.

It was the first change that occurred to me. So, what changed? If people ask me that, I would resolutely answer 'No'. But, it's not like nothing's changed. The truth is, there had been a change. A dramatic change. I, Karuizawa Kei, no longer have a horrible past chaining me down.

To be more precise, it's not quite that. I have gained a power that won't lose to the past chaining me down. That is, yesterday, the events of the closing ceremony that ended the second semester. I was called out by Ryuen and the others, and received acts of bullying. It sounds lame when I put it to words like this but it is a fact that it happened. I hit rock bottom.

At this school I ran away to seeking salvation, I thought I would once again be

dropped down into hell. And then, I heard various things. And amongst those, the shocking one was, that Manabe and the others who bullied me were in fact guided by Kiyotaka. At first I despaired, and even anger came out. But.....in the end I was saved.

By the hands of Kiyotaka. The ones waiting for me as I safely descended from the rooftop were the former student council president and Chabashira-sensei. It wasn't like they had anything to say to me, it was just their concern so that the eyes of unrelated people would not fall on me. Honestly, without their care, I doubt I would have safely made it back to the dormitory.

The only thing they told me was that those two were acting based on Kiyotaka's instructions. I think it's because they realized it was the only way to calm me down. Those events on the rooftop. The seeds that the me who was bullied by Manabe and the others had planted. If I had the power to shake off my past, I would have been more resolute then. It would have ended without what happened back in middle school being found out.....no, that's not it. Basically, I was in the wrong. To act tough, I continued to take on an arrogant attitude.

Towards that, even if Manabe and the others feel displeasure it couldn't be helped. It was a method I chose to avoid bullying. And the demerits of that.

"Fuu.....".

A sigh like that came out. But it's not a bad sigh at all. How should I put it? It was a sigh filled with emotion, no. I can't really put it into words well.

There's only one thing I'm certain about. That is, even when I'm asleep, even when I'm awake. Inside my thoughts, Kiyotaka is always there.

Ever since yesterday, it was burned into my mind and I couldn't part from it.

"...more like, mou, how should I put it, this is foul play.....".

Even though my body temperature should be normal, for some reason, my body became hot. To suppress the amount of heat in my body, I closed my eyes. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. 1st year Class D. At first I didn't even think anything of him. Just a classmate without a shadow. Sometimes the topic of him being cool did arise, but I was never interested. And besides, those classmates soon forgot

about Kiyotaka.

In our modern world, communication skills are a large factor in one's popularity. That is something that is fundamentally lacking in Kiyotaka. No matter how good he is at sports, if it's not accompanied by other elements, the degree of his popularity will not extend any further. That's why with Yousuke-kun in the lead too, Class A's Tsukasaki-kun and Class B's Shibata-kun are more popular by an order of magnitude.

But the real Kiyotaka is not bad at socializing, he's really smart, he's very mature, he's very rational, he's also good at sports to the point he won't lose even to the senior students, and also, he's strong to the point it's almost unbelievable.....there are also ruthless and cruel parts to him, but.....even so, in the end, he'll save me.

"Haa.....!?".

Could it be, I, before I knew it, about Kiyotaka---

"No, no, no, no. No way, no way!".

Holding my face which had become red, I shake my head intensely left and right. As my face became red, I panicked.....I'm almost like a maiden in love.

It's not like I'm denying romance. I'm also a girl who wants to properly fall in love too. But, how should I put it, there's a part of me that cannot admit that I'm looking at Kiyotaka with those eyes.

"That's right. It obviously can't be the case. It's because of him that I experienced terrible things.....".

On the contrary, I'd like him to thank me for not holding a grudge against him. On top of that, to steal my heart away too, I cannot forgive such indulgency.

Standing in front of the mirror, I combed my hair which had become frizzled after waking up.

"But, I'm also too much of a good person, aren't I?".

Even if they happened to bear the fault, I wonder if an ordinary person would forgive Kiyotaka for what he did? Probably impossible. It's obvious that it'd be impossible. On the contrary, they would probably hold a grudge against him. It's

only because it happened to be a deeply generous person like me that he was forgiven. Just be satisfied with that, Kiyotaka. Speaking out loud like that in my head, I shook off those wrongful delusions.

It's just, I cannot breach the subject of having forgiven him already in front of Kiyotaka.

On the contrary, I wonder if I should go bother him a bit. Pretending to be angry at him a bit for having been manipulated sounds good, after all. And also probably, the next time I see Kiyotaka's face, true anger might actually emerge too.

As I was mulling over that, a chat arrived on my phone.

"Today at 11 o'clock, thanks in advance Karuizawa-san".

"Ahh, I see. There was that".

It was a contact from my classmate, Satou Maya-san. Before tomorrow, the 24th, as a notice today, I received a contact from Satou-san telling me she wanted to meet me as she had something to consult me about.

Normally, because I got along with a different group from that of Satou-san, our exchanges were by no means, deep.

Of course, as classmates, we do get along fairly well, but it's the first time I've been called out like this to meet with her.

"But even so, I sure am healthy".

Yesterday, underneath the cold sky, from the top of my head I had countless buckets of water dumped on me and even though such a horrible thing happened, I'm still perfectly healthy to the point I'd like to praise myself for it.

Naturally, after being chilled down to my core I took a bath to warm myself up, but a normal girl probably would've caught a cold and even if they slept for three days straight it wouldn't be strange.

"It's because I'm too used to such treatment.....just kidding".

I realized that sort of masochistic talk smoothly come out. The 'me' up until yesterday. That is, the 'me' that had thought she had changed but in fact had not changed at all.

I was always terrified of being bullied, always cowering. Deep inside my heart, a darkness had always been spreading out. But now, I can say it clearly. I wonder if I was able to change even a slight bit. Taking off my pajamas, and now in my underwear. At that moment, the scars carved into my white body inevitably came into sight. Even if I didn't want that, I would end up seeing it. Every day, I confronted these scars, my feelings sank and I started to want to die. But, I never minded them as much as I did yesterday.

Even though I hated that scar that much, regretted that much and felt that much sadness. In just one day, I can't even believe I would change this much.

"But even so, I can't show this to a boy.....".

If they happened to see such a scar, the opposite sex would end up drawing away. The body of a girl is supposed to be soft and fluffy and beautiful.....This would end up crushing that illusion.

I'm sure even a hundred years worth of love would cool off. No, I had no intention of showing it to anyone else though.....I stored it away in my heart like that. It's just.....I might have not shown it on my expression.....but, Kiyotaka was different.

Even though he saw this scar of mine, he never even once spoke his disgust. Is it just that he didn't say it? Or was it just because it was dark on board the ship? Or just lying? Did he think deep inside that it was disgusting? Or could it be he really did not think it was disgusting at all? Affirmations and repudiations repeat inside my head. But there was no way an answer could be found for that. Just repeating my soliloquy, I realized something important.

"Speaking of which that guy, he touched my body with his hands didn't he?".

Back then, I didn't have time to think, but isn't this a splendidly unbelievable thing? He touched my thighs, my uniform was almost taken off.....I was treated like a germ or a pest by the girls, and I was not protected by the boys either. The whole class, the whole school year, did not even see me as a human, much less see me as a girl. Even though I've never even properly held hands with a boy before, what the hell has he done to me I wonder.

"Really, mou, mou, mou! I'm thinking about it again! I'm such an idiot!".

Once again, let's put a lid on the matter of Kiyotaka and seal it away. I'll do that. That was just an accident so I have to forget about it. I passed my hands through the cloth and smoothly proceeded with changing.

1

Having taken some time to prepare, I headed towards the destination with a trot. The Keyaki Mall that welcomed the winter vacation was overflowing with students. Most of the students seem to have come here to play, as there were far more people than the usual holidays.

"I guess that's true. There's nowhere else to play but here".

All the necessities have been gathered here so I have no complaints but there's no novelty here.

Having somehow made it in time, called out to the Satou-san who was waiting with her phone in hand in front of the cafe that was our meeting spot.

"Good morning, Satou-san".

"Ahh, Karuizawa-san! Good morning!".

Satou-san's eyes lit up as she waved her hands at me. Perhaps she went to the hairdresser but her hair was beautifully arranged. Just with that alone, I ended up imagining various things.

It was yesterday night that Satou-san called me asking for consultation. Both my mind and body were worn out, but I kept quiet about that fact. Of course I would. The fact that I was called up to the rooftop and showered in cold water was something that 'never happened' as far as anyone's concerned. In other words, looking at it from Satou-san's perspective, I have to be the usual me. That's why although I could have turned down the consultation request, I decided to accept it. And besides.....since a while ago I've been curious about Satou-san's actions.

"Sorry, for calling you out suddenly".

"It's no big deal. Don't worry about it".

"It's a great help to me if you say that"

Together with Satou-san, who seemed happy, as planned we entered the

shop. Although it was full, conveniently a pair happened to be leaving too in exchange so we were able to properly enter.

"It's really crowded~".

I said that out loud without thinking. It was exasperatingly successful.

"In the winter vacation, I wonder if all the school years don't have anything like exams".

Towards the Satou-san who said that, I too, had the same question.

During the summer vacation, we 1st year students immediately set out on a voyage on board a luxury cruiser. But, this time, from seeing students across all school years, it seems as though no special exams were being conducted.

I wonder if this school, too, is giving us this service at least for the winter vacation. Or could it be that at the end of this year and the start of the next, some kind of exam would begin? If so, I'd hate it.

"If you haven't eaten breakfast yet, order lots and lots ok? I'll pay for everything".

Satou-san tells me not to hold back with a smile. And just as she said, I ordered an American scone and a cafe au lait, and the two of us, near the center of the shop, sat in a small table for two.

"So what's the consultation you wanted from me?".

A consultation that she'd go as far as to buy me a meal, I wonder if it's going to be a significant request. Correcting my posture slightly, I leaned in with my ears.

"Hmm, yeah. The thing is, you see? The truth is.....soon I'll be going on a date".

Satou said then cut in with that.

".....date?".

Even as I was surprised, I suppressed my tension and asked in return.

"That's right".

While blushing, Satou-san nodded two or three times towards me. I felt a bad

premonition, as expected I've hit the mark. And her partner, if I'm not misreading this, is.

"Umm, with who?"

It seems Satou-san's been waiting for me to ask her that.

"It's Ayanokouji-kun, you see. It's a surprise.....right?"

Satou-san murmured that, seemingly shy yet happy. Suddenly, I could feel a light tinnitus in my ears, but I pretended to be calm.

Taking the scone I had just received into my hands, I bit off a larger bite than usual. A fragment broke off and fell onto the tray. I then poured the cafe au lait into my mouth which had become dry.

"Heh.....so Satou-san's aiming for Ayanokouji-kun. That's a surprise~".

Of course I had realized that Satou-san had fallen in love with Kiyotaka. But, as since she's never consulted me directly before, answering like that was the safest.

"Right? I'm also a bit surprised by myself too. But, during the sports festival, there was the relay, right? Looking at his running figure, my heart was pounding, you see".

Satou-san was speaking with such excitement to the point I felt embarrassed while listening to it.

That figure of hers was indeed that of a 'Maiden in Love'.

"But, doesn't he lack a presence? If it's Satou-san, there should be other, better boys more suited for you. Like, Tsukasaki-kun from the other class, how about him?"

Even across our school year, he was hailed for a period of time as a considerably handsome guy.

He's been a hot topic recently, how about him? I recommended that to her like that.

"That's no good. It seems only a while ago, he's begun dating a senior student who attends the same club as him".

I see. So he's already been taken, that's why I haven't heard any rumors about him. Even a popular idol on the television, male and female alike, as soon as they find themselves a lover, their popularity plummets.

"So that's how it is. Then, how about Satonaka-kun? He should be free even now, right?"

"Yeah, I do think he's cool but.....something's just not clicking with me there".

Even though I suggested several other popular guys, Satou-san showed no signs of being moved at all. It seems Satou-san isn't judging Kiyotaka solely by his outer appearance. Really, at this rate it's almost like I'm saying Kiyotaka's outer appearance is inferior to that of Doujou-kun or Satonaka-kun.....right now he doesn't stand out much but if you compete only by outer appearance alone, without a doubt Kiyotaka is top class.

In other words, Satou-san, who's fallen in love, has realized that fact, huh.....For boys and for girls alike, the outer appearance of their partner is their status. I'm going out with such a cool boy, I'm going out with such a cute girl, just with that alone one's personal evaluation will also rise. Just as I had gained more than I had imagined from going out with Hirata-kun. With this timing, if Satou-san were to go out with Kiyotaka, at this point, Satou-san's evaluation might also rise too.

If Kiyotaka shows off his talent and starts standing out, than in itself would make his evaluation even higher than that of Hirata-kun. Kiyotaka's been gathering more attention ever since the relay but the current situation is, he's not gathering the attention of as many girls as expected. The expression of him normally having a quiet attitude and talking only with Horikita-san, those factors don't quite connect to the boom of the girls.

Next, like Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun, and Sudou-kun. Hanging out with friends like that who are seen in an exceedingly bad light by the girls is also a minus impression.

In any case, up until now Satou-san shouldn't have had that much contact with Kiyotaka. But despite that, falling in love with him and all that after just one act in the relay, isn't it a bit too shallow? I know Kiyotaka much more than her. His true nature, or more precisely, his deep, dark nature. Satou-san should

have no idea about that. Ahh, mou. This is wrong, this is wrong! That has nothing to do with this. I have no reason to speak badly of Satou-san, and I'm in a position where I have to cheer her on.

Why? Because I am Hirata Yousuke's girlfriend. Because I have no reason to interfere with someone else's romance. That is why I, as Hirata-kun's girlfriend, as the leader-like existence of the girls of Class D, I cut in to Satou-san.

"Hearing this may seem a bit like that but, are you seriously aiming for him that much?"

If I didn't know about Kiyotaka's identity, undoubtedly I would have asked something like that.

".....yeah".

In response to that question, Satou-san without any hesitation, answered with a nod. It seems she's hardened her resolve, and Satou-san was not approaching Kiyotaka as some joke. Such a thing, I had already long realized it though.

"Isn't it a good thing that you've found someone you like? And besides, right now Ayanokouji-kun should be free too".

"That's right, that's why I thought this might be my chance. If some other girl also falls in love with Ayanokouji-kun then.....I was thinking like that and I got into a hurry".

If one consults a friend or a best friend regarding romance, there are fifty thousand episodes in this world of having the boy they like be stolen away. It's not a strange thing that Satou-san is being cautious of that. As for me who has a boyfriend that's competing for 1st or 2nd place in our school year, I would have assessed the risk of that happening being as low as possible.

But even so, to think it would even come to a date during the winter vacation, this was beyond my expectations. That Kiyotaka, even though he didn't seem interested in Satou-san, even though the rooftop incident happened he still agreed to go out with her. The paper bag containing the straws, I unconsciously ended up tearing it apart.

".....could it be the consultation, has something to do with that date?"

Hearing that, Satou-san's eyes lit up and she nodded. Ever since a while ago, she's been too dazzling.

"Yeah. You know, like the secret behind making a date a success? I was wondering how I should do it. How did you end up dating Hirata-kun, I want you to tell me various things regarding that".

In Class D, the only ones who have clearly announced their relationship were me and Yousuke-kun. Even if she sought help from her friends in the other classes, Kiyotaka, or rather Ayanokouji, who's that? Something like that is the most that could happen. In other words, Satou-san relying on me is also something that couldn't be helped.

"Karuizawa-san, you started dating Hirata-kun soon after you enrolled right?".

"Yeah. I guess so. It's nothing special though".

"It is something special. It's really amazing, I really respect you for that!".

Saying that, Satou-san, almost as if engulfing both my hands, grasped them.

"That is why that skill, please instruct me in it!".

"It's not something that can be called a skill though.....".

In the first place, I cannot answer a single one of Satou-san's requests. The me who escaped from the ugly bullying of my middle school period approached him, having resolved to switch over from the bullied side to the side where I would not be bullied. Looking back on it, I was very lucky.

It was also an act that stemmed from determining that Yousuke-kun was not that kind of person but it really was a high-stakes gamble. If, when I had asked him to let me take on the false girlfriend role, and he had refused me, the result would have been something different from what it is now. And not just harshly dumping me, he might have even exposed my bullied past to everyone. Yousuke-kun is someone who treasures harmony from the bottom of his heart, and is the type of person to make it into an ideal.

Feeling like he could save me by pretending to be my boyfriend, he gladly accepted it. That's why I accepted him, and chose to be protected under that umbrella of peace. The girlfriend of Yousuke-kun, who's the center of the class.

That title was far more effective than I had imagined. At first, there was envy and grudges coming from the girls of the class, but that too, soon disappeared.

Remembering what was done to me, I took a high-pressure attitude towards various students. Even in shopping, pestering for small change, things like that I traced them all.

And so, I was able to make the throne of the leader of Class D's girls my own.

But, the me who created a false status, clearly have things I can do and things I cannot do. That is why, even if Satou-san requests a romance lecture from me, there's nothing I can do to answer.

For someone without any experience in romance, there's no way they would know the techniques of romance. Since we were dating, to make the fact that we are "dating" common knowledge, we repeatedly went on pretend dates, but my heart was not there.

That's why I don't know what is right and what is wrong now. But I don't want to betray Satou-san's expectations. I don't want her to think I'm a newcomer to romance. If it were me from a while back, I would have probably boldly shown off the knowledge I heard from magazines or the television. Almost as if it were a date I had experienced, I would have been able to talkatively speak about it by replacing it with me.

But, now it's gradually changing. Towards Satou-san, towards someone who's placed their trust in me, I don't want to make random statements like that. Recently, I had grown tired of the me who had been acting bullishly and arrogantly, for a moment, I wanted to talk about something true. But I cannot breathe a word about that. In this school, I have to remain Yousuke-kun's girlfriend and act boldly. That is why I have to continue to tell lies I don't want to tell.

Do I really mean that?

Right now, is Yousuke-kun's existence still truly necessary to me?

At a time like this, unnecessary thoughts like that were floating into my mind. The only dangerous elements to me at present, Manabe and Ryuen's group, have been eliminated thanks to Kiyotaka's strategy (?). In other words, the story

of the bullying will not come forth anymore. And besides, from now on, even if something were to happen, Kiyotaka will surely come and save me, I have that sense of safety too.

The fact that I'm Yousuke-kun's girlfriend is a lump of privileges but if I remove that, I wonder if there is the possibility of having my status in this school robbed from me. Of course, if it becomes a matter of having been dumped by Yousuke-kun more or less that might be lame, but I feel like depending on the 2 of us talking it out, it will go well.

If that happens, things will clear up for me and I will become free. And if I become free, I can finally pursue my true love. In other words, I cannot afford to be thinking such things now. Because the Satou-san in front of me is expecting a good answer from me while waiting. I can contemplate the meaning of continuing to go out with Yousuke-kun later.

The unnecessary thoughts that have disturbed me countless times, this time, I will drive them into a corner.

"After hearing you out what I thought is, instead of going on a trial date, Satou-san wants to go on a real date with Ayanokouji-kun with the intention of going out with him, right?".

"Yeah".

In other words, a date meant to seduce Kiyotaka.

"What should I do to make it go well?".

"Let's see!.....".

Let's think seriously. A way for Satou-san to go out with Kiyotaka.....umm, that guy, I wonder what needs to be done to seduce him.

He's an existence that's clearly divided from other men. I wonder if he'll be interested in ordinary romance.....or perhaps, he might surprisingly be the sort of guy that longs for that sort of ordinary romance?

Since it can be taken either way, making a judgment on this is a difficult task. As such questions floated up and disappeared repeatedly in me, Satou-san brought out a phone.

"I wonder if I was being too vague? Umm, you see, since I'm an amateur at this, I'd like to think of a date plan. Please help me with the decision".

And while lowering her head, she shows me the date plan written on the phone's memo screen.

Meet at 12 o'clock -> Lunch -> Movie Theater -> Shopping -> Confession underneath the Legendary Tree -> Present

It seems overwhelmingly simple, but it was written like that. Firstly, I interjected with the thing I was most concerned about over everything else.

"Wait a minute. Are you planning on confessing to him on the first date?".

"I was thinking of going with the whole intention of hitting and breaking.....only if the courage comes out on that day though".

As I was thinking she should deepen her relationship with him more bit by bit, she went in with a short-term decisive battle that was far beyond my expectations.

"Isn't it going too fast? I think it's not too late if you do it after 2, 3 dates. You might be able to realize some disagreeable aspects about your partner too".

Of course, girls with romantic experiences sometimes seem to make decisions on the spot too. But Satou-san, in regards to romance, seems to be closer to a beginner, I think it's better for her to take it slowly.

But, there's not much credibility in that coming from a fellow beginner like me.....But she seems rushed about the result, or more like I felt as though she were prioritizing her charm.

Could it be, Satou-san might possibly want to make her girlfriend debut in the 3rd semester.

"And also, what does this underneath the legendary tree mean? By any chance, is it one of those if you swear your love you'll be bound forevermore things?".

I wonder if such an urban legend steeped tree exists in this school. Even if such a mysterious power exists, in this day and age where one cannot see their future, being guaranteed to be bound together for 10 years or 20 years cannot

be said only to be a good thing.

If it turns out that the man you've married is a useless one to the point you want to divorce him, being forced to be married to him for life seems more like a curse. "It doesn't seem like it's that famous though, I found it while looking through the school's bulletin board. That, if you confess in front of that tree, it will definitely succeed. And what's more, there are quite a lot of reports like that".

Heh.....I didn't know about that. Since I've also become interested in that, I'll be investigating it.

And when I did, it seems it really does exist, in the school's chatroom bulletin board, there were several cases where a confession went well that were written there. It seems when this school was first founded, some big shot donated it and it was transplanted here. It seems the age of that tree exceeds 8 years.

"Speaking of which, there were several excellent trees like that weren't there.....".

Normally I wouldn't even be conscious of such a tree. The time of confession has to be in the evening before the sun sets. From 4 o'clock in the afternoon to 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Around that time, the condition is that no one else must be around. If that condition is fulfilled, the confession has a 99% chance of succeeding, it seems.

But the 99% part does sound really fishy.

"But even so, isn't it quite difficult? The timing of this confession".

"That's right, I guess. It says if someone else unrelated is there at the moment of confession, things won't go well".

In this time period, the presence of people is quite intense so the timing seems difficult. On top of that, it wouldn't be strange too if there were other boys and girls attempting to execute this legend.

One would have to connect the conversation well, and guide it so that only the 2 of you would be left. Naturally, something like this is just a superstition, and I think of it as a superstition. But if it's to make a once-in-a-lifetime confession succeed, it's a feeling like grasping at straws. I too, if it comes to

victory or defeat, would want to raise my possibilities even if it's only by 1%.

"Hey umm, what's your reason for falling in love with Ayanokouji-kun?".

"Ehh? Why are you asking?".

"No, sorry. It's because I don't know anything about Ayanokouji-kun, you see. I wanted to get an image of him. About what part of him you fell in love with, like that. You know, if hear it, maybe it might be useful for my advice about your date plan, right?".

As I asked her that, Satou-san whispers back while hiding her cheeks inside her hands, looking shy.

"Umm---.....first of all, isn't he cool? Normally he's quiet and mature. And also, he runs very fast.....and in the tests too, he was above me so it's not like he's an idiot.....you know, I naturally think Hirata-kun is better than that but the other boys are all mostly childish".

She's probably talking about Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun and the others. Regarding that point, I'm also convinced. To the point I can't even believe we're the same age. Most of our male classmates are like children. That's why around this period, a large majority of girls become disillusioned with their classmates and go running towards their seniors.

"T-The things I'm saying right now, keep it a secret from the other girls, ok? It'll be bad if they also realize how fine Ayanokouji-kun is. Besides, it'll also sound lame if rumors about me not being used to men were to be spread around".

"Is it fine to consult me though?".

"Karuizawa-san's the girlfriend of Hirata-kun so that gives me peace of mind".

It seems Hirata-kun's existence is a huge one. Satou-san is relying on me. It doesn't feel too bad that she's relying on me to this point.....but of all things, why does it have to be about Kiyotaka?

If this were about some other boy, I could have supported her with my honest feelings. I wouldn't have felt this bothered inside my heart. Is this what they call fate?

"Hah.....".

It ended up sighing all of a sudden. Different from the one in the morning, a heavy one. But having heard that, Satou-san's face became gloomy as I looked at her.

"A-As I thought, I'm not bothering you, am I?".

"No, sorry. That sigh just now really didn't mean anything like that. Really".

I panicked and denied it, but inside my heart, I had been carrying that tone the whole time.....it's not like I'm in love with Kiyotaka or anything though. It's just, how should I put it, I have a special relationship with him. No matter what, that will always take precedence. But right now I need to overturn my thoughts and act for Satou-san's sake. I answer like that to myself many times over.

"Then, let's revise the date plan a little, shall we? If you're going to be eating lunch together, it might be better if you do it after watching the movie. If things get awkward, you can always talk about the movie that way".

"Umm, let me put down the plan Karuizawa-san thought up".

Saying that honestly, Satou-san took out her phone.

The movie is probably already booked but for the sake of the flow it's better if he does it. Watching a movie right away after eating may cause you trouble if an unforeseen situation were to arise. And it'll also make you sleepy so that's a NG.

I accessed the movie theater's HP.

"And? When's the all-important date going to happen?".

First of all, I need to check whether or not the time can be changed, if I don't start by confirming that nothing will start.

"It's the day after tomorrow".

"I see that's fine.....wait, the day after tomorrow's the 25th though!".

I almost stood up without thinking. I panickedly lowered my raised hips back onto the chair.

"Hehehe".

No, don't 'Hehehe' me.....!

The 25th of December. It's the 1 day that's most precious for men and women alike throughout the entire year. That Kiyotaka, giving the ok for a date on that 25th, what the hell is he thinking?

Normally it's supposed to be the time lovers spend together to further deepen their relationships, and a day to confirm their love. It's not suited towards starting a relationship. It's not normal to use such a day for a date. Should have gently declined and moved the date to the 26th.

If this were reversed, there's no mistaking that he would've incurred a considerable amount of displeasure.

A boy who just wants to do lewd things, such a label should be stuck on him. I interjected fiercely like that inside my thoughts.

"Fu, fu".

".....what's wrong, Karuizawa-san?".

"No, nothing. Don't worry about it".

Why am I getting hot all on my own. For someone unrelated like me, no matter what day the 2 of them decide to have their date on, it's irrelevant. The concerned parties are free to decide. I should understand that. Ah mou, ever since a while ago, what's the matter with me?

I became violently angry, towards my own thoughts. I gave those mistaken thoughts a double slap in the face and forcibly sealed them away.

"The 25th huh.....well I guess it's still better than the Eve tomorrow".

The movie theater, too, seems as though it would be overwhelmingly packed more so on the Eve. They're probably going to spend the whole day together after watching the movie.

Even though a lot of couples make use of it, looking at it in terms of the whole school, only 10% to 20% would be couples. As long as one doesn't care about the time and the positioning of their seats, it's possible for them to go as many rounds as they want.

"About the movie, you watch it from 11:50 and it'll end around 13:30. So

before 2 o'clock you have your meals and around 3 o'clock you leave the shop. After that, you adjust the time yourself and after 4 o'clock you confess. Something like that?"

The result of roughly adjusting the time, this is probably for the best.

Satou-san, too, doesn't seem to have any objections and she nodded satisfactorily.

"After that, I think it's also better if you reserve your lunch. You probably want to take the seats near the windows, right?"

Discounting lunch time, without a problem it can be done.

"And also, if you reserve your orders ahead of time, they also make you things that are not on the menu".

"So that's how it is, I didn't know about that.....as expected of Karuizawa-san".

If it's the day after tomorrow, that place too, will have good accomodation. Well, the truth is, it's great if the boy thinks of all these things though. This time, it's a stage for the sake of Satou-san's confession so this is fine too though.

It's just, I don't know whether this was the right answer or not. It sounds pathetic when I repeat it but I've never gone on a real date before.....

2

I received such a consultation from Satou-san, and on the way back from the cafe. The two of us, while chatting away, headed towards the dormitory.

"This morning it piled up quite a bit but it seems from tomorrow onwards, it will be snowing even more".

Receiving such words from Satou-san, I looked around at the scenery surrounding me. Even though it had started to melt slightly, there were still snow remnants scattered about. If this continues, it might even be snowing all year round.

Ahh---so it's snow. Speaking of which, it was about two years back. I pretended that some muddy snow was chocolate kakigori and stuffed it into my mouth. Nostalgically remembering those old memories, I recalled that. For

some reason, I felt that was something from a long time ago.

"I wonder what was so enjoyable about doing something like that".

"Ehh?".

"Sorry, sorry. I was just talking to myself. Sorry about that".

Perhaps it's because the events of yesterday happened, but I always end up remembering that. And as I did, Satou-san's expression changed into a slightly hard one. I had thought it was because I had been talking to myself, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"The thing is, I wasn't able to say it earlier but there's one more thing I want to ask you".

"You've already started? So, don't hesitate to consult me".

I struck my chest with a 'don' and answered her like that.

"Thank you, Karuizawa-san. Umm, well, I'm happy I got to go on a date but.....".

Perhaps she's harboring some anxieties towards her important date, but Satou-san continued.

"Truth is, this is the first date I've ever gone on in my life....so, I don't know what I should do"

"You've never gone out with another boy before?".

Satou-san who looked embarrassed. Well, from the flow of our conversation, I did have a feeling that was the case but.....

I thought a modern, trendy girl like Satou-san would have done it earlier so that was surprising.

"I'm only telling this because it's you, Karuizawa-san, ok? Soon I'll be a 2nd year high schooler and if I still haven't gone on a date, if I told anyone else I'd definitely be made fun of. That I'm too slow. As expected, Karuizawa-san thinks so too?".

"I-I guess so. You're a bit too slow. But doesn't it only mean that you haven't found someone you really liked? It can also mean that you're treasuring

yourself".

"It makes me happy you'd say that".

While deceiving her like that, I followed up. Not to Satou-san but to myself.

"And you see? I think I'd be too nervous and won't be able to properly hold things. That's why including Karuizawa-san and Hirata-kun.....I was thinking if we could have a double date. To make sure things go well with me and Ayanokouji-kun, I want you to assist me!".

She requested me like that. Not able to comprehend the contents of the proposal, for a moment, I was thrown into confusion.

"D-Double date? A-Assist?"

"I should have really said this sooner, right? It's after I had various reservations about it".

Satou-san who apologizes with a sorry expression. Reservations like that end after a few minutes anyways so it's not a big problem. The important thing is, to me, in other words, an existence without romantic experience, she's requesting the role of Cupid in love. I wonder if something as absurd as this could even be.

"Is it.....impossible?".

"That's---".

Undoubtedly, I should decline. With the shallow knowledge I possess, mistakes will definitely be exposed. Ahh but, since this is also her first date for Satou-san maybe I can deceive her? Should I go formal here and pleasantly acquiesce?

"As I thought, you'd rather spend Christmas alone with Hirata-kun, right?".

"Ehh?".

As I fretted over what to do, Satou-san again made an anxious face. I see. If it's ordinary lovers, a lot of them would be likely to spend tomorrow and the day after tomorrow together. If it were the usual me, I would have been able to discern that fact properly but my head was full of thoughts about the closing ceremony.

"Like Karuizawa-san and Hirata-kun, I also want to become an ideal couple".

Looking at it from the perspective of Satou-san who thinks I'm smoothly sailing through school life, this sort of request is neither strange nor distorted. But my heart was bothered. It doesn't have anything to do with Kiyotaka. It's not like I ever liked Yousuke-kun. And it's not like we were truly going out. A false couple.

But, as long as we continue to be a false couple. Neither me nor Yousuke-kun will be able to find true love.

That fact bothered me. Kiyotaka too, will never see me as someone of the opposite sex. And besides, I wonder if someone steeped in lies like me could even be of help to Satou-san.

"That sort of thing is, a bit.....".

After thinking about it, I did think about declining, but I decided to hold my ground. Ever since a while back, the existence of Kiyotaka that periodically passes through my head. If this continues to flicker on forever, it can't be good for my heart.

If so, I just have to make it so that it won't flicker like that anymore. For example, yes. If I bring Satou-san and Kiyotaka together, if I do that, there would no longer be the off-chance where my heart would be stolen away by Kiyotaka.

"L-Leave it to me. I'll do something about it".

"Really? Karuizawa-san!".

Happily taking my hand, Satou-san jumps up and down.....So she likes Kiyotaka that much. If that's the case, towards that first love, I need to genuinely cheer her on. Scraping up the melting snow lying around with the palm of my hand, I pushed it against my forehead.

Reflect, Reflect.

And just like that, the heat pent up in my head cooled down. If I've decided to genuinely cheer her on, at least I'll make sure the double date goes well. The me right now is not the me from the middle school period. I'm no longer the me

who lost 3 years and embraced despair. And finally, I'm not the me after I had just enrolled in this school either. Using a high-pressure attitude to make contact with my classmates alone is not a great thing. Not being able to protect myself through any other means, I can't end up the same way as those bunch from my middle school period.

If she's suppressing her own embarrassment to ask for my cooperation, I need to earnestly face her, otherwise I won't be able to call myself a true friend to her. But if it becomes a double date, several issues will emerge. Right now the problem is whether or not Yousuke-kun is free. I need to quickly confirm that afterwards. On Christmas, it had been decided that we wouldn't meet. Since the fact that we were a couple had surpassed even our school year in becoming a rumor, appealing to our surroundings even more about our coupleness was no longer necessary.

In order not to waste each other's time, we had decided to slowly spend our Christmas.

If someone happened to ask, we went on a date in our rooms, there would be no problem if I just answered like that. Even if someone happened to see me outside alone, I can simply say we were planning on meeting at night in order to end the story. That's why Yousuke-kun may already have planned out his own schedule.

"Umm hey, I'd like to tell Ayanokouji-kun that we coincidentally met up with Karuizawa-san and the others though".

As I was going over several plans inside my head, I was requested that additionally.

"So you are against making it a double date from the very beginning?".

"Somehow, I guess. Is it no good?".

"Ahh--, umm.....".

Of course it's not like it's no good. If that is what Satou-san is hoping for, that too is fine. But after having thought it over a little while, I immediately made my conclusion.

"Let's not do that. It might be better to honestly tell him you'd like to have a

double date".

"Is that, so. I wonder if he'd dislike it?".

It seems Satou-san's assessed that after hearing it, Kiyotaka might dislike it.

"If he finds out later that it was set up, that's more likely to make him dislike it though?".

"I see.....".

"Satou-san's the one who decides that though".

I said that to her just in case. Let's do this! I cannot force her like that.

Satou-san seems to be troubled but if you ask me, that's a mistake. There's no way that Kiyotaka wouldn't notice the strategy we set up. I don't know what stage he'll realize it at, but sooner or later, he will realize that it's a set up. But I'm strongly pointing that out because naturally right now, it won't give rise to anything but a sense of discomfort.

Let's stop because Kiyotaka is surprisingly sharp? Saying it like that would clearly be unnatural. Kiyotaka and I have no connection to each other. That is what's recognized by everyone else including our classmates.

But just because of that I can't say too that the double date is a bad thing. Because I don't have such knowledge.

If I ended up looking it up afterwards and found out that 'A double date is ideal for beginners' written in an article, I would also be left responsible. The correct answer would be to have Satou-san make the judgment.

"On that day, would you like to meet up with a natural flow? Yep, that's good".

The direction I was advocating for did not reach her, since Satou-san hoped for a strategy to hide the double date.

"If Satou-san is fine with that, then I don't mind though".

That's why I honestly said so. All that's left now is to make sure he doesn't find out we're cooperating. Since it's come to this, I might as well test out how far I can deceive that Kiyotaka.

"Ahh, if Hirata-kun happens to turn down the double date, then I'm sorry".

Saying that firmly ahead of time, we had arrived back at the dormitory.

Part 3

When I got back to my room I laid down on the bed, gripped my phone and stared up at the ceiling. Just before I arrived back at my room, inside me, a different anxiety had been spreading. The consultation from Satou-san. The fact that she loves Kiyotaka. The story about wanting me to lend her a hand so she can become a couple with him. At the same time as I felt as a strange irritation, I could not help but also feel turbulent. If this case happened to be just a simple romantic affair, it might have been easier on me.

I had mustered up what wisdom I had in me, and I think I managed to back up Satou-san. But more than anything else, what I'm curious about isn't the romantic aspect of it. Is Kiyotaka going on a date with Satou-san out of interest in the opposite sex? That sort of thing. What if this doesn't have a "romantic objective"? Then that could become a huge problem.

I do feel like I'm overthinking this, but I don't know. In any case, the partner's going to be Kiyotaka. I don't exactly understand what that Kiyotaka is truly thinking of. What if he's not interested in this date as a member of the opposite sex, but rather wants to learn more about Satou-san herself? A date meant to determine whether or not she's a usable student. I imagined such a thing.

Just like he made contact with me, the fact that Satou-san could end up being the key to smoothing out Kiyotaka's school life, a part of me was terrified of that. If Kiyotaka's gaze falls on her, I wondered if it would end up threatening my existence. Depending on the circumstances, Kiyotaka who had been acting as my shield up until now, would no longer be so. I pressed the call icon, and brought up the keypad. Then I manually typed in a 11-digits number.

"I haven't even memorized my own number and yet.....".

Before I knew it, Kiyotaka's contact number was carved into my head. Now all I have to do is touch the call icon again and the call will connect. Even if I called him, what am I even planning on asking? I asked that to myself.

Did you really think Satou-san would be easier to use than me? Something

like that?

"What's that? That's just stupid.....".

Before I even start questioning him, it's almost like I want to be used by him. That's not the case. It's just... I wanted to protect myself. Using the shield known as Kiyotaka, I just want to live on while protecting my status at this school. That's right, that's obviously the case.

"Why don't I hear it from him directly?"

Thinking that, I put force into the thumb of my left hand. But, hovering at a distance where it's almost touching yet not quite so, my thumb won't move at all. In the end, I wasn't able to touch the call icon at all.

"Hah. I'm like an idiot".

Why do I have to ask him something like "Are you done using me?" myself. And just like that afterwards, my phone shook.

"Uwa!?"

On the screen, the 11-digits number I had typed in earlier was displayed. I thought I had mistakenly pressed the call icon but that wasn't the case.

".....h-hello?"

I panicked and answered the call.

"I have something I'd like to ask you about".

That usual lethargic, flat voice came into my ears.

"What is it? The thing you wanted to ask me about?"

"Are there people around you right now?"

"None. I'm in my room".

Could it be, that he got worried about whether or not my health deteriorated and called me out of worry. But even so, it's too late if he's only calling me now at night. Still, my heart danced with that slight expectation.

"There's something I want Karuizawa to investigate".

But that expectation of mine was crushed in under 1 second.

"What's with that? You won't be relying on me anymore, you said something like that didn't you? Even though you deliberately warned me to erase your contact number"

I put that complaint (although I don't know whether such an expression is real or not) into words. In the first place, ever since the events of the rooftop yesterday until today. Doesn't he have a lot of things he should be saying to me?

Something like "Did you catch a cold?". Even if it's not tasteful words like that, at least he could say a word or so like "I'm sorry". The fact that he was pulling the strings to have me bullied, normally would ruin the mood and if it weren't me, he might have even been reported to the school. In whatever form it may be, at the very least there should be an apology. And to think the first words out of his mouth were "There's something I want you to investigate".

"Hey, Kiyotaka. Do you even understand your position? There's no more need for me to cooperate with you any further, or more like you better take responsibility and protect me forever. For free".

Having been frustrated from Satou-san's matter, I thought I'd daringly say something like that. But, those words became stuck inside my throat and did not come out. It was because I was afraid that if I said something like that, Kiyotaka would leave me.

"What's the thing you want me to investigate?".

"It's about Satou".

".....about Satou-san?".

In this situation, of all things, for it to be about Satou-san. Just how far will my surroundings go to piss me off.

But there's also the matter of the double date, I kept quiet about the fact that I met Satou-san today.

"What about her?".

"I want to know about who she normally hangs out with, what her pattern of action is. To be more precise, I'd be thankful to know about her hobbies and

preferences. Of course, if you already know, then that makes it quicker".

I don't know anything about that. I maliciously whispered that inside my heart.

"Unfortunately for you, I and Satou-san are from different groups. That sort of thing is a bit distant from me".

"Distant, huh. It seems even the center of the girls has a lot of things she doesn't know".

"Muu.....you're saying some mean things".

"If you don't know, then please find out. I would much prefer a method that would keep Satou from finding out as much as possible".

".....well, if I ask Shinohara-san, I might be able to find out to a degree".

"Please choose the option you think is ideal. I'll leave the method up to you".

"I got it, I'll try asking around.....at least tell me the reason why".

"Please mail me the details".

It seems after finishing his business, Kiyotaka was satisfied with that, after saying his one-sided request he cut the call. Nothing came back in response to my questions.

"What's with him? Doing whatever the hell he wants.....I absolutely didn't expect anything from him".

I should've coughed once or twice near his ears.

While spitting out those complaints, I sent a chat to Shinohara-san. Even though I'm being oppressed like this, I felt like admiring myself for my faithfulness in honestly following his instructions.

And as I did that, I was able to properly secure information regarding Satou-san from Shinohara-san. For a while, we idly chatted away as I gathered information. Compiling the information I had heard, I sent it to Kiyotaka's free mail address.

I didn't get a reply like usual but without a problem, it should have been delivered. As I thought, that guy Kiyotaka....is he interested in Satou-san? It's

obvious that he plans on gathering information before the date so he can carry it out advantageously. That means, if the date goes well the two of them will start going out with each other? Or does it mean.....it's an act meant to turn Satou-san into a pawn so he can use her. Even as I thought it over and over, no answer was forthcoming.

There was no way it would be so.

"Ahh mou! What does that guy want?".

I could not sleep tonight, it seems like it's going to be a long day.

Chapter 2: Ibuki's One Misfortunate Day

Part 1

This is a note of the events from 2 days prior to the Christmas date, on the morning of the 23rd. I was heading towards Keyaki Mall alone with a certain goal in mind. Swiftly heading over to a certain shop, I looked around for what I needed.

"I've never taken the ones from here.....".

Having looked up its reputation on the internet, as well as hearing it from the clerk, I chose about 2 of them. I put the items into a small paper bag and proceeded with the checkout.

Amazed at the surprising expensiveness of each one of those items, I left the shop with the paper bag in hand and for now decided to head back to the dorm. All that's left is to stop by at the convenience store on the way back and buy some things and that'll be the completion of my goal. After that, I'll once again return to Keyaki Mall and watch a movie whose screening is about to end soon.

That was my plan for this one day. However, due to contact from a certain person, that plan began to crumble.

"How are you today, Ayanokouji-kun?".

Even though it's a wide area, the school grounds is still a confined space. If I wander around like this I'm bound to encounter various students. Right before the exit of the mall, one girl called out to me. Carrying a cane, she walks slowly as she approaches me. 1st year Class A's Sakayanagi Arisu. She knows I'm from the White Room. And the daughter of this school's chairman.

"You're going out this early? You're alone today, I see".

Normally Sakayanagi has an entourage accompanying her around, but I could not see anyone.

"I came here to play with Masumi-san, but I haven't met her yet".

Sakayanagi notices the existence of the paper bag in my hands.

"Are you in ill health?"

"No, not at all. As you can see, I'm healthy".

Lightly spreading out both my hands, I appealed to her that I'm alone through overaction. And on top of that, I put the small paper bag into my pocket.

"I'm glad. If you wouldn't mind, would you like to play together with me?"

She extends an unbelievably unappreciated proposal to me. I don't even need to consider my response.

"I'll have to decline. You're an existence that stands out after all".

If I were to be seen playing with Sakayanagi, it would unnecessarily cause an uproar.

"Fufu. That's a shame".

It's obvious. If she wanted to make my circumstances common knowledge, she should have taken action a long time ago.

But even against Ryuen, she did not let slip even a single fact about me. Judging from that, I could tell that Sakayanagi intends to take me on alone.

"Then would that mean there's no problem if we have a small chat while standing around here?"

"To chat while standing around like this, what happened?"

"If I call him this he would get angry at me but Dragon Boy-san was searching for you, right? To be more precise, he was searching for the tactician who was manipulating the class from the shadows. What happened with that matter?"

Right now, other than the parties involved, no one should yet know of the rooftop incident as well as its conclusion. However, it wouldn't be strange even if she managed to obtain a portion of that information.

For instance---

"The students of Class C had a falling out, and it seems it's become a serious matter for them. Did you know?"

That's right. The fact that Ryuen and his group were injured in their fight against me. Since those facts are readily apparent, it's also easy to spout various speculations about them. On the surface, the story is that Class C had an internal dispute, Sakayanagi probably heard that from somewhere.

"I did hear about that but I don't know the details of it".

"It seems Dragon Boy-san had a quarrel with his underlings. However, it just didn't make sense to me and I had thought Ayanokouji-kun might have been involved in it".

"Why am I involved there? That's because you're decided that this tactician is me, right? From my point of view, it's an unexpected incident. I had thought Class C had it together".

"Class C has it together, huh?".

"Whether it be via terror or dictatorship, they are together as one aren't they?".

"I see, that might be the case indeed. It seems like Ayanokouji-kun isn't involved then. From what I can see, you aren't injured at all.....".

It seems she's thoroughly observing my expressions and gestures, but she won't be able to destroy me from there.

"It seems an internal dispute might be the truth. It's just, I cannot explain his actions in being so interested in Class D".

"There are quite a lot of talented students in Class D after all. In particular, Kouenji is one".

"I see. Indeed if it's him, he seems like he would be a suitable opponent for Dragon Boy-san".

As a result, Sakayanagi concluded thusly.

"I suppose that is fine. Once the 3rd semester begins, I will be able to find out the truth of it all".

"Can I change the topic?".

Rather than subtly changing the topic, I brazenly changed it.

"Yes, of course".

And without even an objection, Sakayanagi accepted that.

"I've been curious about that thing recently but a few days ago, it seemed like you were getting along with Ichinose. Leaving aside the matter of your own class, I didn't figure you for one to intermingle with other classes".

I recalled Sakayanagi and Ichinose getting along and walking together from a while back.

To go out of their way to spend the holidays together, it's something that wouldn't have been done if they weren't getting along with each other.

"Fufu. Please stop with the jokes".

Perhaps my remark was interesting to her, but Sakayanagi laughs.

"She and I.....aren't friends you know?".

"And this means?".

"On the other hand, she thinks Ayanokouji-kun and I are good friends though.....".

Saying that, she paused for a bit.

"Since Class C seems to be obsessing over Class D, I became slightly jealous. To tide over my boredom, I was simply messing with Class B".

It seems they were just opponents for her to kill boredom with, it seems.

"More importantly, once we enter the 3rd semester, would you mind playing with me then?".

"I'm sorry but I don't intend to. If you want to, then please go ahead and play with Horikita and the others".

"She's not suitable enough to be my opponent, you know".

"Then why not Ryuen, or the senior students. I'd like you to ignore me".

"That's an impossible task. Because without even a single day's delay, I want to fight against Ayanokouji-kun".

Even though I told her I had no intention of going along with that, Sakayanagi

did not back down. Even if I continue acting modest towards Sakayanagi, it probably wouldn't have any effect. As long as she knows about the White Room, she won't stop hounding me on that.

"If I continued ignoring you, what will you do?"

"I wouldn't mind it even so but.....is that really fine I wonder? If Ayanokouji-kun won't become my opponent then that would mean someone else would have to be my opponent in your place. I won't be taking responsibility even if the Class B which is in a cooperative relationship with you right now, just so happens to crumble".

"So that idle talk a while ago's going to be involved huh".

It seems the meaning behind Sakayanagi approaching Ichinose is that she's begun her attack against Class B. Just how much of it is true? During my conversation with Sakayanagi, I felt a slight sense of fun.

"Until you decide to be my opponent, in the meantime, I shall be playing with the people of Class B. A clean hole might open up, and Ayanokouji-kun and the others might be able to naturally rise up to a higher class".

Telling only me about her invasion of the enemy. But even so, at this stage, it's better to not conclude that she's really going to be attacking them. It might just be a provocation, or her playing with words. But there's no mistaking that this is a chance. Because if Sakayanagi's eyes are directed away from me towards Ichinose, I might be able to avoid getting caught up in unnecessary conflict.

"Can you really win against Ichinose and the others?"

"And by this you mean?"

"From the time of enrollment until the end of these 2 semesters, Class B's given off the impression of having steadily consolidated its power. On the other hand, Class A's been pulling its own legs. Even if you try to appeal to me that your capabilities are superior your credibility is suspect".

"I see. So you think I can say anything I want as long as it's words alone, huh".

Even though Sakayanagi calmly accepted that, she allowed me a slight peek

into her feelings.

Adding on to that, I will airdrop more fuel.

"Recently, I've also come to realize your identity. The fact that you're the daughter of this school's chairman".

"So that was the case. Through what circumstances did you come to learn of this?".

Sakayanagi snaps. Because it was a topic that she could not help but snap at.

"The circumstances don't matter. One thing has become clear. That is the fact that, at the very least, there should have been some influence from your father in regards to you being assigned to Class A. In other words, even if you would have been chosen based on your capabilities, there's no way to say for sure anymore. Even if you start boasting about defeating Ichinose, it's hard to believe that all of a sudden".

The student known as Sakayanagi Arisu still has not had her capabilities confirmed to the point of being acknowledged by a third party.

"Then how would you explain away the fact that I am in command of the majority in my class?".

"Controlling the class? That doesn't speak anything about your capabilities. Even the Ryuen and Ichinose who you consider inferior to you are doing the same thing. If we're talking about Class D too, Hirata's the same. If we're talking about methods of bringing everyone together, Hirata seems superior and that alone won't serve as proof of one's projected capabilities".

Katsun! Letting her cane ring out like that once, Sakayanagi began to revise her approach from a different angle.

"I suppose with you as my opponent, such words meant to trick children won't have any effect. I apologize for the rudeness".

Saying that she apologizes once.

"However, Ayanokouji-kun. I wonder if you too, aren't being a bit too arrogant. Aren't you just drunk on the fact that you happen to be the first success of the White Room?".

Looking at it from Sakayanagi's perspective, I must have looked like that.

I haven't thought of it until now, but even if I'm interpreted that way it's something that couldn't be helped. If one had to pick between two options of either being a success or a failure, then beyond the shadow of a doubt I would be classified as a successful human being. If that were not the case then that man.....my father would not be obsessing over me.

"As expected, Ayanokouji-kun seems to be misunderstanding something. Aren't you thinking that the fact that you were 'behind the glass' is something remarkable? Indeed, the amount of knowledge you've accumulated ever since childhood is something out of the ordinary. It seems you're mostly hiding that fact in this school but I'm not doubting the excellency of your academic abilities as well as the excellency of your athletic abilities. However, that place is a facility that was prepared for 'have-nots'. People who are naturally born as geniuses have no need of such a place, it could also be said like that you know?".

"That might be the case".

I won't deny that. As a matter of fact, my father's conviction is indeed just that. That whether or not you have superior genetics does not matter. By having one undergo thorough education from the moment of their birth, from the amount of time allocated to sleep even to what you're allowed to eat. By regulating each and every single last one of them, a perfect human is sculpted. That this method is the only way to give rise to superior talent that will support Japan. My father believed in that.

"Why do you bear such hostility against me?".

"It's because by defeating Ayanokouji-kun, it will also be proof that people absolutely cannot win against natural born talent. That no matter how much effort one puts in, there is a gap that simply cannot be bridged. That is my creed".

It means she does not doubt the fact that she herself is a genius. Perhaps she was searching for Sakayanagi, but from behind her, Kamuro slowly approached.

"So you were here....hah. Hey, don't just abruptly move away from the promised meeting place. Your legs are bad, you know".

Even though she had noticed me, Kamuro did not meet my gaze and only badmouthed Sakayanagi.

"I do apologize. I arrived earlier and was merely talking a walk".

"Then at least contact me once about it".

Since Kamuro's met up with her, she won't carelessly let slip the topic regarding me. It seems Sakayanagi has absolutely no interest in making my capabilities common knowledge. Or more like, it seems more like she dislikes the thought of spreading my story around and having her prey be robbed away from her.

"This might be abrupt, Masumi-san, but what do you think about Ichinose Honami-san?".

"This really is abrupt.....".

Having just met up with her, Kamuro seems to be slightly puzzled by this talk without any context to it.

In particular, the fact that I was beside her would have been a contributing factor to making conversation hard on her.

"The thing is, I was just talking with him regarding the strategy to conquer Ichinose-san".

"Conquer....huh. Even if you ask me what I think.....Ichinose is an honors student and she helps with troubles. A nice person. Something like that?".

"That is correct. The part about her being an honors student should be obvious. She always seem to be at the top when it comes to tests, and she's properly brought her class together. What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?".

This time, she asks me.

"I'm of the same opinion".

I answered like that without delay.

"Then, do you think it would be a simple task to defeat such an honors student like Ichinose-san, Masumi-san?".

"Shouldn't it be difficult? The unity of Class B seems to be strong so it won't

crumble from the outside. Methods like bribery won't work on Ichinose either. There's no other option but frontal attack but even if you say our class is also perfectly organized it's still suspicious".

"Indeed at first glance, conquering Ichinose-san seems like a difficult task".

"Are you saying that's not the case?".

"Yes. The truth is that is not the case. Everybody has their weaknesses. And even that Ichinose-san has them. A decisive weak point".

And saying that, Sakayanagi laughs.

"The fact that she is an honors student is something the two of you also acknowledge and is undoubtedly the truth. However, aspects like taking care of problems and being a saint. Are those really coming from her true self? Don't you think there's a side of her that looks down on people deep inside her heart?".

"I don't know.....it's the the majority of people, at least externally, adopt that sort of attitude. And though their mouths speak kind words, there's no telling what they may be thinking deep inside. But that is not a bad thing. It's obvious that anyone will act in their own self-interest. But, that Ichinose really might be an idiotic saint".

Like Kamuro said, the majority of people have a secret side to them.

Leaving aside whether or not it's a violent secret side like it is with Kushida, having a darker side should be natural. However, the student known as Ichinose Honami absolutey does not allow anyone to sense that. The fact that Ichinose's weak point has been grasped means, it's related to that?

"You don't think so?".

"No. She's a prim and proper person. To be more precise, without any falsehood at all, she's filled to the brim with virtue".

"So that means she's a seriously idiotic saint, huh?".

"That is correct. You are spot on".

Sakayanagi answered her like that with a smile.

"Then in that case, I wonder if Masumi-san and Ichinose-san happen to be similar?".

"Huh? What's that mean? We're completely different, are you being sarcastic?".

"That is not true. This may come as a surprise to you but Masumi-san and Ichinose-san are quite similar".

Kamuro continued to deny exasperatedly that they were not similar yet Sakayanagi continued on.

"You are similar. As for why, the problem with her and the problem with Masumi-san are the 'exact same' after all".

"The problem is the same? Wait a minute. What does that mean?".

Do you understand, Ayanokouji-kun? Her eyes are asking me that. Since there was no way for me to know, I lightly shook my head and denied it.

"Do you not understand? It means your secret which I hold in my hands and the secret she's hiding deep down inside are the same. Of course, only the premise of it is the same and the results are completely different".

Having that be explained in such detail to her, something should have clicked within Kamuro.

"That Ichinose, did the same thing I did.....?".

Not being able to believe it all of a sudden, Kamuro had a complicated expression on her face.

"It doesn't seem to be that uncommon of an occurrence".

"Did Ichinose tell you that herself? Do you have any basis for saying that?".

The state in which Kamuro snapped like that was not normal. I had thought her to be more or less a rational student, but it seems she was unable to ignore that problem Ichinose is said to be carrying.

"Naturally. She let me hear of it in detail. She had gently opened up her heart, which had been sealed shut underneath that hard shell of hers, to me. By use of cold reading".

Now that's rather courteous of her to explain the details in that explanatory tone.

Cold reading is a part of the art of conversation. Through the use of careful observation ability, it is a method to extract information from the target and grasp it. Strictly speaking, she had probably interlinked it with hot reading in order to approach Ichinose.

"People, in order to make themselves look good, readily tell lies. They are such creatures. You and Ichinose-san are only the tip of the iceberg. Surely there are many more. People sure are interesting things. No matter how talented, they always readily make mistakes".

Having said that, she returned her gaze to me and concluded thusly.

"On top of that, there are also many such aspects that could be considered holes, but in any case I will be crushing the hints to conquering Ichinose-san. I will be thoroughly crushing Ichinose Honami-san. I expect you to take this as proof".

It seems she wants me to show her that I can arrive at the truth on my own, but unfortunately for her I'm not interested. I'd like Sakayanagi to go on a rampage to her heart's content.

It seems I managed to manipulate her pretty well.

Sakayanagi should also be aware of my cheap provocations but it seems she could not help but be triggered by them into answering.

"Then, shall we leave, Masumi-san?"

Saying that, Sakayanagi and Kamuro started to walk. I too, in order to pass them by, began to walk. And at the moment we truly passed by each other, Sakayanagi opened her mouth.

"But even so, you're not saying anything are you, Masumi-san?"

"Huh? About what?"

"You saw me and Ayanokouji-kun talking to each other just the two of us, and we were discussing our strategies going forward. But even though that happened, you're not asking any questions about that, are you? Normally it

feels like you would throw several questions at me though.....".

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean? It's just I'm not interested in it at all".

"I wonder if that's true? You have the surprising tendency to put into words anything that catches your interest. Yet in this case, that's not evident at all. I wonder why?".

Since Kamuro did not answer, Sakayanagi continued.

"Could it be, you already possess some information regarding Ayanokouji-kun. And if that's the case, I wonder where you got your hands on such information.....could it be, in a place I'm not aware of, the two of you have had a chance to meet each other in private?".

Having sniffed out that slight strangeness, Sakayanagi stared at me with sharp eyes. But I neither replied to her with words nor did I return her gaze.

If there is a fault to be had, then it lies with Kamuro.

"Fufu. I suppose this is fine. Since I'm in a very good mood today I will let this slide. Then, have a pleasant day, Ayanokouji-kun".

Saying that, she took Kamuro with her and left. Even during the winter vacation, to be used by Sakayanagi like that, Kamuro has it tough too. I wonder if that means that weakness of hers that was grasped was simply that large. It's just, at the very least it's worth hearing the matter about Ichinose and Kamuro carrying the same problem even if it's only half of it.

At that moment, Sakayanagi stood to gain nothing from lying, but does not mean it would be wise to simply believe Sakayanagi's remark either. If I can learn the truth once Ichinose falls from her current position that's fine too.

"Should I let at least Horikita know about it.....whatever should I do".

Since they were currently allied with each other, Horikita may move to reinforce Ichinose. Personally I think it's better to leave it be, but the one to decide that is the one leading the class, in other words that role falls to Horikita. I'll directly inform her sometime over the winter vacation. Since I have decided there is no urgency to this matter, I'll hold off on contacting her right away.

After that stormy existence had passed, I put on an innocent face and headed

back towards the dorm.

In order to accomplish my initial objective of delivering the items I had purchased. However, that objective of mine unexpectedly ended quickly. As I arrived at the entrance of Keyaki Mall, I passed by a girl who seemed healthy.

Perhaps it was because she was in a rush, but without noticing my presence, she trotted off somewhere. Just in case, as I pursued her, I saw her meeting up with a friend and then her figure disappearing into a shop.

I stared at her until she was no longer in sight, and I erased my decision to return to the dorm from my mind.

"I guess I'll go see a movie then".

I then headed towards the movie theater.

Part 2

Coming to the movie theater is not a strange thing for me to do. Because I periodically visit it over the holidays. For people, some may consider the expenditure of points on the appreciation of movies as a waste but it's an unexpectedly important thing to have various interests too. As for me, movie appreciation is becoming a hobby of mine.

On top of it being ideal for relaxation, it also allows me to absorb new knowledge. Frequently, I have had my inquisitiveness stimulated by having a movie touch upon various subjects.

But even so, it's not like the movie I will be watching today is a movie made with such expertise. It's not a painfully sweet romantic movie that's watched by couples in the midst of Christmas fever either.

It's an action movie focusing on a small conflict between countryside mafia. There are days when I simply want to empty my head and watch the story. By the way, although the screening of this movie would end today, by no means is it a long-running masterpiece. It was a hopeless, B movie. As a result, I was able to reserve a seat with ease over the net but I continued to fret over whether to go watch or not, and ultimately on the last day of its screening, carried by a

different purpose, it was a movie I had decided to go watch too.

After a brief interaction with the receptionist, I designated the time and movie I'll be watching. I was handed over a laminated sheet with the seating chart printed on it. By the way, a miscalculation occurred here. The seats in the far back I usually use for movie appreciation seemed to be full and there did not appear to be much free space.

Just with a slight delay in the screening of the scheduled popular movie, it seems the customers have turned their focus to this movie instead. On top of that, perhaps it's also because Christmas is near, but most of the seats were being reserved in sets of two.

Rather than not watch anything at all as a couple, let's watch at least one. It's probably something like that.

Feeling the center of the large opening in the front row would make it easy to watch, I told the operator that. As I did, luckily enough there seemed to be several vacancies in the center region, and I succeeded in securing a seat. I wonder if the popularity of the seats at the far ends have something to do with the presence or absence of couples? I don't know the circumstances of the movie theater in that regard.

Since there was still roughly around 20 minutes until the screening starts, I decided to kill time in the corner where pamphlets were displayed. And around 10 minutes before they started admitting people in, I entered alone.

From behind with a clatter, student couples enter. Sitting in the center of the front row, I patiently wait for the movie to begin. The seats around me begin to fill up from a relatively early point. I directed my gaze at the screen. Before the actual movie starts, I quite enjoy watching the preliminary announcements of movies soon-to-be screened.

That's why before those preliminary announcements occur, I always make sure to be at my seat. Rather than watching it from the TV in my own room, it

stirs greater interest in me as to what movies I should watch next.

That sort of big screen is extraordinarily charming and it's no exaggeration to say that I've brought myself to the movie theater with that as my purpose.

However, right now, in the theater it's not a cheerful movie commercial that's happening but rather commercials of convenience store goods that are being played. Turning over soft and full rice with a spoon or scenes where crispy sea moss is being burned on top of nets. And footage of children eating completed rice balls also played.

As the screening time drew near and the seats began filling up gradually, I became curious as to what sort of situation is unfolding and looked around.

The same row was now mostly filled and to the right of me sat a couple. To the left, one seat over sat another couple. Using the darkness to their advantage, they were holding hands with each other.

Even a movie of this quality still manages to bring in couples. Since the seat immediately to my left is still vacant, it would probably end up being a vacant seat up until the end.

There's no one who would come and listlessly watch a movie alone the day right before Christmas Eve. At the same time as I placed my phone in silent mode, just in case, I switched the power off as well. Then, around the same time I did that, the lights in the cinema gently dimmed and the preliminary announcement of the movie began.

This is the start of the exciting moments.

Then with that timing, a shadow fell on me from my left. One student then lowered herself onto the seat. It seems there's yet another odd person like me who came to see a movie alone on the day before Christmas Eve. Just by her choosing this movie alone I'd like to offer her my praise. As I thought that, I let my gaze slide over.

".....".

I ended up opening my mouth dumbly without thinking. The identity of that high school student was the student of Class C, Ibuki Mio. Just the day before, on the rooftop, after such a flashy incident occurred, an awkward feeling lingered.

Fortunately enough, the lights inside the movie theater have already been turned off. Not noticing me, Ibuki directed her gaze towards the screen. I'm in the camp of those who watch the movie until the end credits have finished playing, but if I stay until the very end the lights may come back on. No helping it, today I'll be retreating as soon as the end credits roll. However, I had a single miscalculation here.

That is, a problem that frequently occurs in movie theaters with the 'armrest'.

If I were in the corner, I would have been able to surely make exclusive use of both the left and right armrests. However, in seats other than the corner, it's always a battle for possession of the armrest.

As far as movie theater rules go, there are no regulations determining which armrest is whose and in a lot of cases, the early bird gets the worm. Since the couple that had arrived before I did were already making use of the armrest on my right, I had thought to use the armrest on my left but Ibuki casually placed her elbow on said armrest.

It's not like there wasn't enough shared room on the armrest for two, but just with minor things, elbow and elbow would end up touching. Perhaps she became aware of that, but Ibuki as though she were unconsciously trying to confirm the other side, looked towards me.

Naturally, since I was observing everything, our eyes met.

"Geh".

The voice that came out right away was such a disgusted sound from Ibuki. Due to the commercials and the preliminary arrangements going silent

miraculously at that moment, I was able to hear that quite well.

"It's a coincidence, huh".

Feeling that not saying anything in itself would be quite unnatural, I called out to her. However, without answering me, Ibuki averted her gaze. It seems she intends on ignoring me.



That, too, lets me come to a clean decision that this makes things easier for me. Thinking that, I concentrated on the screen. However.....

Ever since the screening started, I could feel a fixed gaze at me from Ibuki's side. Perhaps she was considerably curious regarding my presence, but it doesn't seem like she's focusing much on the movie.

Why don't you watch the movie properly? Is what I would like to ask her but as long as I can't speak in a loud voice during screening that would prove difficult. Then should I try whispering into her ear?

No, if I do such a thing, Ibuki might snap at me. Here I should simply endure Ibuki's gaze and spend the time pretending to not care. Fortunately, ever since childhood, I had been used to being 'monitored'.

Not letting anything I've realized in my mind show on the surface, I watched the movie. It's just if there is a problem, it's that the movie itself is not a very good one. Truly a B movie. Ever since the screening began, isn't it about time to stop being so repetitive, I wonder. From now on, in order to attack the enemy, the protagonist is about to storm the enemy territory and just before that climax.

Just before the scene that would make one's palms sweaty, suddenly the screen blacked out. At first thinking that it was some sort of performance, the students remained silent and continued to watch the screen. However, no matter whether we waited for 10 seconds or 20 seconds, neither the picture nor the sound showed any signs of progressing. This is strange? As I began thinking that, an announcement rang out inside the hall.

"We apologize for this inconvenience. Due to trouble with the equipment, the screening will be halted temporarily. This may be an inconvenience but please stand by for a few moments".

That announcement came forth. Even as students voiced their complaints all at once, it seems they've decided to quietly chat away while waiting.

"Somehow I'm not in luck.....".

As though she were directing it at me, Ibuki said that with a sigh. Does she mean to say the fault for the trouble with the equipment lies with me?

"It's also unexpected for me. To think you'd come to the movies today".

Towards me, she replied.

"It's none of your business when and what timing I come at, right?".

Perhaps she didn't like what I said, but she naturally gave me a rebuttal.

"Likewise".

That's why I answered like that to match her in the end.

"You're.....".

Saying something and then closing her mouth again for a moment, Ibuki opened her mouth once again with a strong gaze.

"Up until now, you've been secretly mocking me deep down inside. I cannot forgive that fact".

It's not like I don't understand Ibuki's feelings of anger, but she has no right to hold a grudge against me.

Even if I comfort her, even if I say that's not the case, such follow ups won't work on Ibuki. That was why I chose to adopt the best policy.

"That is power, Ibuki".

"Huh.....?".

Only a part of the theater, between me and Ibuki, an uneasy atmosphere flowed. Of course, it came from Ibuki's side.

A sharp gaze was leveled at me filled with irritation and rage. But, without minding her, I continued speaking.

"No matter what the situation is, if you only had the power to overcome your opponent, it wouldn't have become a problem, isn't that right? Just because your opponent happened to be somewhat hiding their abilities, that alone should not have caused you to pay any heed. If you had stopped me, Ryuuen and the others could have won. At the very least, it could have been brought to end in a draw".

If after saying those caustic words, I had been beaten down on that rooftop, there would have been nothing lamer than that.

"That is.....".

That is something Ibuki absolutely cannot refute.

That is one's strength. Whether your opponent is hiding their abilities or not, that should have been a trifling matter.

"Besides, unlike Ryuuen and Sakayanagi, I have no intention of aiming for the upper classes nor do I have any intention of standing out through a one-man play. Naturally, because I don't want to stand out, I won't be showing off any unnecessary abilities. The fact that I fought against Ryuuen too, was a choice I had made after weighing my options on a scale and having decided there's no other choice. To mock my opponents, or look down on them, I've never even once thought of doing so".

This is not something I'm saying to comfort Ibuki. In a sense, Ibuki may be feeling even more humiliated than ever before. To humiliate one's opponent, that is in other words, to not even acknowledge them as a threat. But, what I'm trying to say is that to me, Ibuki is just like a stone on the side of the road.

".....I don't like it".

No matter how logically I put it, obviously it would be difficult for her to accept it emotionally.

"You say you don't want to stand out, but that's strange. If you hadn't done something to stimulate Ryuuen back on the uninhabited island, something like

this would never have happened. No, even before that. If you had just overlooked Sudou's violence incident, that would have been it".

"That's right. You may be correct on that point".

If I had simply let Sudou be expelled, allowed Ibuki's tricks to throw Class D into disarray on the uninhabited island and allowed the shipboard test to proceed as normal, Ryuen would not have eyed Class D in the first place. In particular, during the battle with Class B, I should have hid myself away.

"Even though you say various things with your mouth, you were using your abilities. Even though you were hiding, you were still using them".

I have the right to use my own abilities.

But, for Ibuki who wouldn't like that sort of phrasing, it must have been an unacceptable reality for her. Perhaps Ibuki had thought any further conversation would be a waste of her time but she gazed out at the blacked out screen. I too, without objection, let bygones be bygones. Either way, soon the screening will resume. Then my time with Ibuki would be over too.

Part 3

Once the movie ends, I'll leave without watching the end credits too. Such a vision that I had imagined was all too quickly smashed to pieces. It had become an unexpected situation.

I waited and waited but the screening did not resume. Perhaps the trouble with the equipment is proving to be difficult or it's just that they're inefficient. Both Ibuki and I are feeling equally awkward so I'd like to get this over with already.

"Hah".

Such unabashed sighs came repeatedly from Ibuki. However, in a situation like this, it's understandable to want to sigh. I've already started to lose interest in the movie.

"Ahh---.....what do you think is going to happen?".

No longer able to stand this silence, I tried initiating a conversation like that. Since she must be curious about what's going to happen too, Ibuki should not be leaving her seat. If this were not the case, she would have left a long time ago.

Or it's simply that since the other students were showing no signs of leaving, she could not do so either? However, Ibuki rested her chin on her hand while placing it on the armrest opposite from me and showed no signs of even looking at me.

I felt as though an opaque glass or a considerably thick glass had been placed between me and Ibuki.

Needless to say, Ibuki's attitude was one that was saying 'You're annoying so don't talk to me'.

I thought as much, but it might be better if I stopped beating around the bush here. Even now it feels as though a poisonous snake is about to leap out and bite down on my arm. As a result, I decided to remain silent. But, when exactly is the screening going to resume I wonder. Even though it's only here and there, students who were beginning to tire of having to wait have already begun leaving their seats.

I had thought Ibuki would have gone along with this flow and leave too, but she isn't showing any signs of leaving her seat. Perhaps she simply wishes to see the continuation of the movie or perhaps---

In any case, I too, want to watch this movie to the end and see how it concludes. If I don't, then the very meaning of having come here to watch it in the first place would be lost. I suppose this is the time to show off my perseverance. Switching on my phone, I checked the time.

Approximately 20 minutes have passed since the announcement. Not just this

screening, it seems like this is going to have a huge impact on the next screening as well. As I turned back and looked, the number of customers remaining had sharply decreased down to only a few people, including me and Ibuki.

If they had come to see the movie alone, they may have persevered, but in the case of couples they could not afford to keep their partners waiting. They probably don't want to waste their precious time alone with their lovers in here. I should interpret this as them having migrated away before it gets too boring.

".....you, aren't you going back?".

As I lowered my gaze down to my phone, Ibuki called out to me. She had turned her head away from me to the extent I could not see her expression.

It seems her suspicion towards the fact that I had not left caused her to speak out.

"I've already watched 80% of it and honestly, I'm curious about how it'll conclude. It's already been a 20 minutes wait so it should be resuming soon".

I've persevered up until now, so it would be a waste for me to go back now. A mysterious theory like that formed inside my head.

"If it's about the conclusion, you can search it on the net and as much results as you want will show up, right? Including whether or not it was interesting".

"I don't feel like reading the reviews reflecting the opinions of others".

The true quality of the work, whether it be good or bad, is something that I won't know unless I watch it myself.

Of course, it can be a reference index that could be used to decide whether or not to watch the movie but it is by no means something that can be used to evaluate the movie. Not to mention if 1 or 2 lines explaining something as important as the climax can satisfy you, there would be no need to even think

about coming here to the theater and watching it.

"I don't care about this movie anymore. I just don't want to leave before you, that is all".

"You're rather straightforward".

It seems she's persevering for a reason completely unrelated to the movie itself. However, unfortunately enough, Ibuki won't be winning this contest.

It's a draw. I have no intention of leaving my seat until the screening resumes. I suppose this could be interpreted as being the advantage a man who has no plans for Christmas Eve tomorrow has.

The thing which concluded this contest between the two of us was a sad announcement. That was, the fact that the trouble with the equipment could not be fixed and the screening would be cancelled. It was also explained that the process of reimbursing us would occur.

"I'm really not in luck".

In other words, if I wanted to know the conclusion, I'd either have to wait until I could borrow the movie and then borrow it or simply read the spoilers on a review site to complete it.

Even though the cancellation of the screening had been announced, without even looking at me, Ibuki still showed no signs of moving. So I decided to leave the movie theater since my business here is done.

Part 4

Now, perhaps it's the fault of the strange waiting time but my shoulders were feeling unusually stiff. There were unforeseen entanglements with Sakayanagi and Ibuki too, so I don't feel like taking a detour in going back. As I left the movie theater intending on heading back, a voice called out to me from behind.

"Hey, wait. Do you think you can just keep on hiding your identity from your surroundings like this?".

It's Ibuki. After chasing me all the way here I was wondering what she had to say, but it's just that.

"Haven't you been paying attention to the conversation? You should keep what happened at that time locked away inside you".

"This isn't a joke. All this time, in your mind you've been ridiculing me".

I cannot forgive that, is something she doesn't even need to say, it's written all over Ibuki's face. It seems her dissatisfaction towards my conduct, words and ideas earlier had grown further.

"Then what are you going to do about it? Will you try spreading it around?".

".....I won't do that. I won't be the only one in trouble then, right?".

"That's right. Depending on the situation, not only the members who were there on the rooftop but also Manabe and the others will be caught up in it".

If they follow the chain of circumstances all the way back, the school side may even trace it back to me. However, I can come up with as many excuses as necessary. The very most they would be able to achieve is get me suspended from school.

"In the first place, conflict between classes is the foundation of this school. You're barking up the wrong tree by blaming me".

It's only troublesome even if she expects me to fight fair and square here.

"I get it, I get it.....it's just physiologically speaking, I cannot accept you".

As I analyzed this girl known as Ibuki Mio, I could see Ibuki has yet to take a single step towards adulthood. In all likelihood, she's practiced martial arts ever since she was a child and has continued to take pride in her own strength. During childhood, there is barely any difference between males and females as far as strength is concerned. Therefore, as long as she possesses the proper technique, it is fairly easy to acquire the power needed to overwhelm the opposite sex. However, as one ages, this becomes progressively more difficult and around the time one hits middle school, the gap between the potentials of

the bodies grow. If one considers only the strength of the body, then it can be said that there is nothing at which females are superior to than males.

This is not discrimination, but a genuine gap that exists. Of course, considering your average high school student, Ibuki could be categorized as being fairly strong. A man without any martial arts training could not possibly hope to compete against her. However, against a man whose potential is the same as or surpasses hers who has also undergone the same level of training, it is unfortunate but there is no way for her to win. People naturally learn such facts. But Ibuki is still a 1st year high school student. She probably has yet to acknowledge that wall of difference.

"Going all quiet like that, what are you thinking about?"

"I was wondering how I can resolve this peacefully".

"So? Did you think of anything?"

"Unfortunately I couldn't think of any way. No matter what I say, you don't seem like you'd accept it".

For the first time today, just slightly, Ibuki loosened the corners of her lips.

"Correct. I won't accept it, I won't withdraw".

As I expected.....

In order to unravel this inexplicable puzzle, a frontal attack may be what's needed.

"By the way.....do you happen to like movies quite a bit?"

"Huh?"

It's natural that Ibuki would take a 'What the hell are you asking me' attitude. However, I ignored that attitude and continued.

I daringly tried unleashing an ordinary topic of discussion.

"To the point you came to watch this movie alone. Not to mention it's a fairly minor movie".

"Isn't that fine? I have my own objective".

I was hindered by that mysterious expression.

"Objective?".

".....To watch every movie that's being screened in this school. It's not such a significant objective".

No, that's surprisingly an amazing thing. Everyone, in regards to this school lifestyle, have brought with them an objective they've decided on themselves. To make friends. To always go out on a holiday. To graduate without being absent or late a single time. To continue getting 1st place on tests.

From simple things to achieve to the more difficult ones. Even amongst them, what Ibuki brought with her, 'to watch every movie that is being screened' is something that seems simple at first glance yet I believe is one of the more difficult ones. Naturally it'll be easier to go watch the movies you like, but for genres in which you're not interested, it would be harder to get yourself to go and watch them. The majority of people would think of such an objective only as a pastime. However, no matter what, anything at all, to establish an objective and to follow through with it is surprisingly a precious thing.

".....what, are you mocking me?".

"I wonder".

Having interpreted my silence in a bad way, Ibuki glares at me. I could have honestly praised her too, but I dared not do so. This is a bit of a bother for me too. In any case, it would be for the better for me to split with Ibuki quickly. If I stick with her any longer, we may be witnessed together unnecessarily by the other students.

"So what are you going to do now? Shall we have tea together?".

"Stop joking. I'm leaving".

Obviously she did not accept my invitation. I had already known I would be rejected. But to keep up that flow I continued on with my words.

"Then you'll go right, I'll turn left. And with that we'll adjourn for today".

As I said that, I pointed out the roads to the left and right. If the both of us walk off in separate directions, not a single problem would occur. This is the ideal path.

"What? I also want to get away from you without a second's delay. You don't even have to tell me".

Our love seemed to be perfectly mutual, as Ibuki immediately turned right. I too, turned my back towards Ibuki and moved towards the left. However---

I had my arm grasped from behind. Ibuki was pulling on my arm.

"Oi, what is it?".

"Shut up. Ishizaki and the others are coming this way".

As though to hide, she dragged me off into the shadows, and then quietly observed the situation. Then, with a slight delay, as I followed Ibuki's gaze, I saw Komiya and Kondou with Ishizaki at their center.

Just up until now, Ryuen should have been amongst them but of course he was not present there.

"Is Ishizaki ok? He still seems unsteady on his feet".

"Shut up. He's already fine".

But perhaps his entire body is in pain, Ishizaki walks while distorting his expression in agony at times. Seeing such a situation, Komiya anxiously looked around and said.

"Speaking of which, that thing earlier.....that you fought with Ryuen-san, is that for real?".

".....yeah. Albert and Ibuki were with me too. Ryuuen-san's.....no, Ryuuen's time is up. From now on, that Ryuuen bastard won't be ordering anyone around anymore".

"That is a relief, but you know. Who's going to be making the strategies from now on?".

"As if I know. Kaneda will probably take care of it".

As they exchanged such words, the three of them passed by in front of us.

"Fuu. They didn't notice us".

Ibuki relaxes. She probably did not want her classmates to see her alone together with me. Especially Ishizaki, since there's no telling what kind of reaction he would have towards that. However, Ishizaki's words that we heard had indeed reached our ears.

".....a mail came to me from Ishizaki a while ago. That Ryuuen guy, he didn't quit school after all".

"Is that so?".

As I said it like it was someone else's business, Ibuki drew close.

"You did something. If not, it's hard to imagine that Ryuuen would change his mind".

"Even if I did something to stop him, didn't you try to stop him?".

From the slip of her tongue and her attitude as well as her tone, I had a feeling that was the case but it seems like I'm spot on.

"I hate Ryuuen to death. But, the fact that someone like you, who's not even our classmate, had such a strong impact on him is something I hate even more and cannot forgive".

"It's precisely because I am an outsider, that I could impact him. And vice versa, what I cannot do would be something you would be able to do. Just like how Ishizaki is intending on carrying out his duty".

Even though it was an interaction overheard as they passed by, it's not too difficult for me to guess what had happened. Chivalry, is what they'd call it I suppose. I could tell that Ishizaki, too, even though he started out hating Ryuen, is doing this as a courtesy to him.

".....do you really think so? Isn't it just because you can stand above Ryuen and make an appeal that way?"

Ibuki said that without obediently acknowledging Ishizaki's idea. But that's just a leading question. Ibuki is aiming to draw out what thoughts I truly have on the matter. Ibuki's eyes are saying as much.

"Right back at you, do you really think so?"

That's why I decided to return the question as it is to her.

".....I should say no, but, we were thoroughly oppressed. Even if it was three of us, the fact that he defeated Ryuen should inevitably cause Ishizaki's evaluation in the class to rise".

"I see. You could also look at it that way".

As I nodded as though I had been convinced, she lightly kicks me on the back of my knee.

"Can't you dodge this?"

"Hey look, I'm not an esper or anything you know. I can't dodge everything".

Even though Ibuki was suspicious, she did not pursue the matter any further.

"So what did you think about it, Ishizaki's remarks?"

Perhaps she was dissatisfied with just having her opinions asked, but she asked me like that.

"Even if I say I disliked it, it would mean I still have acknowledged his ability".

The downsides of having Ryuuen expelled, Ishizaki may have been able to sense it from experience. While drafting the plot that Ryuuen came up with, they had a falling out, that would be the case. Not once speaking out openly about what happened with me, he seems to be honorably upholding the promise. Of course, this is all a part of my calculations, but there had been no absolute guarantee. Leaving aside now, the possibility that he would change his mind tomorrow and reveal everything is not zero. Even about Karuizawa's matter, if he felt like spreading it around it could be spread around.

"Albert probably won't say anything but how long do you think Ishizaki will keep quiet?".

Ibuki is also aware of that, that's why she tried to confirm the situation by using that as a provocation.

"If he speaks out, then he speaks out. I'm thinking about what to do then".

".....ahh, I see".

Since I showed neither surprise nor agitation, it seems Ibuki immediately lost her interest. In any case, Ishizaki and the others are gone. Now I can finally split up with-----

I crouched down instantly and lowered my head a few dozen centimeters. At that very moment, Ibuki kicked the space my head had been occupying at a high speed.

".....so much for not being able to dodge. You dodged it, didn't you?".

"It was a kick from the front after all. More like, you kicked me with all your strength didn't you?".

A roundhouse kick from an experienced martial artist. If it had been a direct hit, a concussion would have been unavoidable.

"Even though you're so strong, you won't let even a bit of it out. Why?".

"Do you usually go around announcing your strength to everyone?"

"That's.....".

"Whether we're talking about martial arts or whatever, as long as there's no opportunity for you to use it, you won't receive acknowledgement from someone. Unlike Sudou, Ishizaki and the others, I'm not the vigorous, enthusiastic type".

"Fight me".

"What did you say?".

"I said fight me again. Let me fight you when you're serious and going all out".

Perhaps she simply could not let go of that matter, Ibuki once again switched into battle mode. If only Ishizaki and the others had not shown up, I could have easily split up from her.....

"How did it even end up like this?".

"I hate you. I hate that you're using your front face and your back face for different purposes".

"I see".

It's because for better or for worse, she's seen guys like Ryuen and Ishizaki. Ibuki is the same too. Leaving aside the fact that she acted the role of a spy on the uninhabited island, the real Ibuki is the same.

"I've always had this sort of personality, so you have no right to hold a grudge against me. Even if I say that, it's useless isn't it?".

"Useless".

And with those two characters, she denied it.

"Leaving aside what's happened up until now, unless I get payback for what happened on that rooftop I won't be satisfied".

No matter what I say, it doesn't seem like she's going to be listening. Now that

Ibuki has recovered, she's thinking of pursuing a chance at victory. It would be a simple task for me to just run away here but once the 3rd semester begins and she pushes the matter the same way as now it would be far more troublesome. Naturally, Ibuki also catches onto that.

"Once the semester starts and I carelessly interact with you, that would just mean more trouble for you, wouldn't it?"

Even if she doesn't directly spread it around, simply by sticking with someone from a different class, our surroundings would get suspicious of us. Is that really fine with you? It's a somewhat forceful threat that's saying something like that.

If I had to say, that too is something akin to 'spreading it around' but Ibuki seems like she wishes to deny that is the case.

"If you want me to withdraw, you have no other choice but to fight me again".

Even if she says that one word, 'fight', it can have several meanings.

"You're not saying you want to fight through Go and Shogi, are you?"

"I don't know the rules for either one of those".

That is truly unfortunate. I was confident in my skills for the both of those.

"The way to settle the fight is already obvious, isn't it?"

Saying that, she took a fighting stance inside the mall packed with pedestrians. I don't even have to think, it's that sort of thing. She surely must have been deciding things to be black or white through this means.

".....perhaps, it might be that nothing will change".

"Hah. Are you saying even if we fight, the result won't change?"

Perhaps my words left her uneasy, but as though she were about to burst a vein, Ibuki curled her lips. Her lips, which had been relaxed just a moment ago, now seemed like a far off memory.

"Not just the result, even Ibuki's own way of thinking".

It seems like she also understands based on the way she lost on the rooftop that even if she gets a rematch, the result of it will not change. However, no matter in which manner her loss had been, there's no mistaking the fact that Ibuki was not satisfied with it. It has nothing to do with males and females.....it's probably just that she doesn't want to acknowledge her defeat.

'Then you win'. Even if I say that, it'll only amount to pouring oil on a fire.

"In the end, you won't accept the fight, will you?".

Of course, ordinarily there's no way I'd accept. Especially since I'm tired right now, I genuinely don't wish to take any unnecessary action. But---

"Do you have time?".

I called out like that to Ibuki without rejecting her.

".....nothing in particular. Other than the movie, I don't really have anything scheduled. Could it be you're accepting?".

Obviously, Ibuki who hadn't expected me to agree, was left confused. In fact, it seemed as though she were taking a step back.

"Was it a joke?".

"No such thing. If you're going to be accepting, then that's just how I like it".

Although she had been surprised, Ibuki immediately snaps back. It seems as though she wants to start the fight right away and she's leaning forward.

But we can't afford to do that. There are a lot of people going in and out of Keyaki Mall. It's a place that's far too conspicuous.

"You're accepting? Declining?".

"I wonder what I should do. I mean, this place is too conspicuous isn't it? Even if we fight as you proposed, what'll you do about the location?".

This is Keyaki Mall. There are countless eyes watching us. Furthermore, if we are to avoid being seen by anyone, there's no avoiding a change of location. But even if I say that, the school grounds is also basically out of the question. During this winter vacation, there's no telling who has eyes where. At this point there's no other choice than to move to our rooms inside the dormitory but a fight there cannot possibly be arranged, Ibuki also understands that.

".....search. We'll search from now".

"There's no option to simply give up, is there?".

"By meeting here you're already doomed".

Saying that, Ibuki turned her back on me and started walking. It seems she wants me to follow her.

"What will you do if I run away?".

"I'll run after you, catch up to you and when I find you, I'll dropkick you on the spot".

So it seems to be the case. Suppressing my urge to run, I followed her.

"I'll say this ahead of time but the main premise of this conversation is that we find a suitable location".

"I know such a thing already".

As long as she acknowledges that, for now I'll accept it. If she cannot find an isolated place, then this conversation too should be water under the bridge. Compared to me onesidedly rejecting her, Ibuki won't do anything reckless that way. I'm taking action based on that reading. Even though I'm a few meters behind Ibuki, who's walking ahead, I don't want to act together for long with her.

Then, Ibuki desperately walks around Keyaki Mall. She looks around to see if there is an isolated blind spot somewhere. But she won't find one easily. There are places inside the mall where students cannot approach to an extent, but there are surveillance cameras there. And besides, even if students aren't there,

employees will inevitably be present.

But this would be the case even if we were to leave the mall. It would be a different story if we were behind a school building but as long as we cannot enter without our uniforms, that too, would be impossible.

It would be strange if we went out of our ways to change into our uniforms and meet up again, and if other students were to see us entering the school together, that in itself is already similar to a failure. I went along with her provocations in anticipation of that but as I thought, it was the right move.

"Let's give up already, shall we? In the first place, a blind spot in this school is--".

"Wait a minute".

She interrupts me. Perhaps she had thought of a good idea but she turned her eyes in a certain direction. What Ibuki was looking at was a door with glass windows fixed on it with the words 'Only Staff Permitted' written on them.

Conveniently enough, perhaps the staff inside was working, but he came out of there along with a flatcar. Wearing yellow aprons with the nameplate 'Kimura' written on them. And in a large font, the characters Keyaki Mall Pharmacy were printed on them. On the flatcar, there were three corrugated cardboards which looked like they contained goods. He was pushing that flatcar and heading towards the pharmacy inside the mall. In all likelihood, he were restocking their goods.

"Follow me".

"Oi that place is---".

As she called out to me like that, Ibuki placed her hand on the door. Opening the door, it looks like this is a warehouse where goods are stockpiled. There were no staff present, it was a dimly lit space with only minimal lighting turned on. Looking at the cardboard boxes, it seems candies and gauzes and the such were packed into them. As I thought, all goods belonging to the pharmacy. The

heater is not working and it's slightly chilly.

"If it's here, no one will see us. Am I wrong?"

Indeed, in a place like this meant for exclusive use by the staff, there are no surveillance cameras installed. However, isn't this usually a place that should have been locked.

I can hardly imagine a place like this would normally be left wide open. So this could mean an employee had coincidentally forgotten to lock this place? Or it could be that they expected to be back in no time and so left without bothering to lock it. No matter which one it is, staying too long in a place like this would only lead to trouble. The very fact that a student would be here is nothing but unnatural. If we're discovered, there's no avoiding a scolding.

"It's not a big deal, right? Just say we came in here by mistake and that'll be the end of it. It'll be a different story if we steal something but luckily we don't have any bags we could hide anything in either, we're completely empty-handed".

Certainly we'll be able to make an excuse but.....it seems Ibuki's desire to settle this no matter what is rather strong.

It means she's more or less willing to take risks. Even if she understands the result already, 'perhaps', that feeling absolutely won't vanish.

"It's not much but in such a confined space, we can't fight, can we?"

This is not much different from the dormitory room I had initially thought of.

"I don't really mind though?"

As long as it fulfills the condition of no one seeing us, it seems she has no intention of asking for any luxuries.

"Even if you say that.....if the staff from earlier come back immediately what'll you do?"

And besides, normally places like this are locked down to prevent people from

wandering in. There aren't much chances of the goods being stolen, but the probability of that happening isn't zero.

Perhaps they didn't lock it down since they were intending on coming back here afterwards, or perhaps they had simply forgotten. Either way, there's no way no one would drop by for a long time.

"If we finish this before then, it's fine right?".

Not even listening to my opinion, such optimism.

As I desperately tried to propose a change of location, with a resounding 'Gashan' sound, I could hear it being locked.

"It seems there's a possibility of this heading in a bad direction, it seems like they forgot to lock this place down and came back to do that".

"There's no need to panic really".

"Look".

I urged Ibuki to look at the doorknob. Ibuki then dubiously looks at the doorknob too.

".....hey. How come there's no way to open the key?".

"For a glass window fixed door like this one, there are cases where there is no thumb turn on the interior. A thumb turn is, by the way, the way to open the key as you put it".

It is for crime prevention purposes that a thumb turn was not installed. Because if one smashes the glass, they can simply insert their hand through it and use the thumb turn on the interior to unlock the door.

"In other words, we can't get out?".

"That would be the case".

"What's with that? Every time I get involved with you, does it mean I'll end up

trapped in a locked room? Ahh mou, remembering the elevator is only making me feel more nauseous".

"This time I'm completely unrelated. Isn't it because you entered this place?".

"Huh? Are you saying it's my fault?".

No, really, there's nowhere else for the responsibility to go but to Ibuki. Before it was the midsummer elevator, now it's midwinter. Strange things like this also happen.

"But even so, the circumstances are different compared to the time with the elevator. The composition of the glass seems to be nothing out of the ordinary, so in the worst case scenario, it's a simple enough matter to simply smash it".

"So that means in the worst case, we can still get out?".

"However, it would mean a third party would definitely end up knowing about it".

The fact that we had entered the warehouse would certainly end up being discovered.

".....fine. I'll just have you change your way of thinking and go with a positive outlook".

"I have a bad feeling about this though".

"That feeling is accurate. I've confirmed that if it's here, there'll be no one to get in our way".

As Ibuki looked back towards me, she took a fighting stance.

"I'll let you decide the rules. Until the opponent acknowledges their loss? Until they lose consciousness?".

This situation in which there is no escape, it seems Ibuki is intent on using it to her advantage. In a situation like this, even if I wanted to escape, that would not be possible.

"Then when the opponent declares they give up, that'd be their loss".

".....hold on. On second thought, I'll decide the rules".

"Oi".

"If we go with those rules, then before we even start fighting, you'll just acknowledge your loss won't you?".

Correct.

"That's why, whether I think it's a win or a loss. Until black and white are clearly decided we'll continue with this fight".

What an overbearing and unreasonable thing to say.

"I got it. I don't mind going along with that proposal of yours. However, since you're going around making up conditions, I'll have you agree to my one condition as well".

"What?".

"Once we've settled this, you are forbidden to challenge me ever again. Is that clear? Of course, if it's a legitimate fight in an exam set by the school, then I have no right to forbid you from that but at the very least, for a personal fight like this, I'll have you make this the last one".

".....in the first place I was intending on settling it all here".

It seems she has no complaints with that, as Ibuki slightly nodded and accepted it. If that's decided then all I can do is throw my switch on as well. From the rooftop incident to this, the continuation of this hand-to-hand combat was outside my expectations but it can't be helped.

On the contrary, the real problem lies after I have defeated Ibuki.

Let's end this quickly without dragging it out.

"You really are an annoying guy. You're prioritizing thoughts about getting out of here".

"The location matters after all, if they find out we've entered the warehouse it'll become a problem too".

The excuse that 'we entered by mistake' will not have a strong effect unless we contact them immediately. The fact that we entered the warehouse while the delivery of goods is taking a long time, is a heavy one.

Regardless of whether she had realized my feelings or not, Ibuki continued to kick away at me while being on her guard.

As I expected, her footwork is the core. It's not an easy task to continue dodging in this small warehouse. And on top of that, I'd like to avoid damaging the piled up cardboards too if possible. I also have my various expenses, and since I'm borrowing 'a sizable amount of private points' to Karuizawa as well, I'd like to avoid pointless expenditures.

However, I doubt a little counterattack here will be enough to break Ibuki's spirit. In a fight she's betting her pride on, she won't easily give up. But even if I knocked her unconscious, this would still be the case. Ibuki would still obstinately refuse to acknowledge her defeat.

A rule where the person in question would decide victory or defeat, a troublesome fight got forced onto me.

In order to win, I have to attack but I cannot afford to simply beat her down. If this were a fight to the death, I won't show any mercy either but this is just an unrelated fight without any benefits for me. Whether it be on her face or on her abdomen, I don't want to clumsily leave behind any scars and blotches on her. And if that is the case, then the number of techniques I can use on her will inevitably be limited. To force her to acknowledge her loss yet not injure her. A method to make both of those happen.

Of course, it's not like both of them are assured but.....I avoided Ibuki's kick with the bare minimum movement required. It's not my dominant hand, but I used my left hand.

Pan! And with a dry sound like that, I used my palm to smack Ibuki's forehead. A technique that utilizes the hard part on the base of one's palm to strike the opponent. It is possible to have the damage caused by it permeate into the interior of the target. Accompanied by an intense sound and pain, Ibuki collapsed backwards as though she were blown away.

"Ha-----".

The opponent, who had gotten hammered by that attack, without even knowing what hit her, had her consciousness shaken by the pain and the panic. If I had hit her with even a bit more force, she probably would have lost consciousness.

Recklessly, Ibuki poured everything she had into defeating the enemy in front of her. Even if it's easy for me to exterminate her consciousness, it's not so easy to exterminate her feelings.

".....are you telling me you didn't even need to take this seriously?".

Resisting her swaying field of vision, Ibuki holds her forehead in her hands while glaring at me.

"If you're also an experienced martial artist, then you should understand too".

"I do understand. I don't need something like that to be pointed out to me.....but, there are things I cannot accept".

That is, this fight with me in other words. Ibuki roared out words that didn't even sound like words and once again came kicking at me. The opening she gave me was by no means small, it was a kick that emphasized nothing but pure strength. It may be a one-hit surekill she's betting on, on top of understanding that she won't be hitting me through trickery.

Or could it be she's preparing for a counter through simultaneously hitting each other? Either way, I have no intention of letting her land that attack on me. I used my right hand to block Ibuki's kick and used my free left hand to grab Ibuki's throat.

"Gah.....!".

A state where she would no longer be able to breathe comfortably. As though she were struggling, Ibuki used both her hands to grasp my left hand. She digs in with her nails and resists desperately, but my left hand did not even budge.

"Make your decision, Ibuki. Do you want to stop here, or pointlessly continue? If you choose the latter, there's no future for you".

If she would be convinced by such simple words, we wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

However, even so, in the end just one more time I decided to test Ibuki.

"Ryuuen showed it off. How about you, Ibuki? Do you have enough ability to show it off?".

"Guh!".

Ibuki glared at me with as much intensity as she had before. However---Ibuki's hands trembled and she slowly placed that hand on top of my left hand.

Ton, ton, ton. She weakly tapped me three times. From that gesture, and her closed eyes and the resigned look on her face I understand. I gently loosened my left hand and released Ibuki.

"Hah.....hah. I didn't think you'd go easy on me just because I'm a woman, but you really showed me no mercy".

"You're not exactly an opponent I can go easy on, are you?".

And besides, if I had gone easy on her, Ibuki would have gone berserk even further. Well, it is true that I was barely trying in terms of using my abilities but that's another story.

The important thing is that I didn't look like I was holding back on her.

"Ahh mou. Why.....?".

Even though she looked frustrated, it seems Ibuki had been allayed as she sat down in that spot.

"Fine. I just have to acknowledge it, right? It's your victory".

I don't even care about winning or losing but if Ibuki will be satisfied with that then I won't deny it. This reckless fight, too, had some meaning for the both of us.

"I've never seen someone as strong as you before, not even amongst adults. How did you even become this strong?".

"By practicing repeatedly every day. It's obvious for someone who understands martial arts, right?".

"Ahh, I see".

Having understood that I wasn't answering her seriously, Ibuki sighed as though she had given up.

"So? How did we get out from here now? I'm telling you to let me cooperate with you too".

"It's very simple".

From the school's site, I will call Keyaki Mall, or rather, the pharmacy inside it with my phone.

"Excuse me, is a clerk named Kimura-san there?.....yes, if he's there, please get him on the line if you wouldn't mind?".

Not long after, the clerk named Kimura answered the phone. I informed him of the fact that we were trapped in here.

"If it's like this, won't it become a problem?".

"That's right. There's no guarantee that we can through this without a penalty. To get this over with without making it a big deal, I'm going to have you act like a fool too, Ibuki".

Not too long after, the staff who had locked the door earlier, opened the door

and entered. Then, upon spotting us in the warehouse, he proceeded to question us on why we entered and why we did not immediately contact them.

"Sorry, I got ecstatic on my date with her and ended up searching for an isolated place. I didn't realize this place would be locked".

I used the fact that we were on the cusp of Christmas, and played the part of the idiotic couple who ended up getting over excited. Naturally, even as a lie, I won't make the statement that we are 'lovers' because if the staff decide to report this to their superiors, it may be interpreted as a fabrication. I simply avoided making a direct statement like that, and only acted to make them think that way.

"Right, Mio? You should apologize too".

"H-Huh? What're you---".

Ibuki immediately responded to having been called by her first name, but I used my stare to shut her up. It's this sort of situation, she should understand that any verbal slips here could end up hurting us. Of course, I have thought about the off-chance that she would betray me and have prepared accordingly for it. In the worst case scenario, I'll receive damage too but I'll make sure she suffers more damage. I've made preparations to push more than half the responsibility for this onto Ibuki. Because it's difficult for me to prove that it was Ibuki who willfully entered this room.

".....I'm sorry".

Even though she seemed dissatisfied, Ibuki lowered her head.

Going along with that flow, I informed them that we have not touched any of the items. The male staff repeatedly and strictly cautioned against it, but blame also lies in the fact that they had forgotten to lock the door, and so this time it ended with the decision for them to not report to their superiors. This is also the reason I did not call just about any random staff in the mall, but specifically

the person in question who forgot to lock the door, because I was aiming for this. After he let us go after lecturing us, the clerk named Kimura locked the door and returned to his work.

"Somehow we got through this".

".....you, in that one moment, you saw even the clerk's name?".

Even more than having her first name be called by me, she seems to be more interested in that.

"It wasn't intentional. It just happened to catch my eye".

"Ahh, I see".

Even though she was the one who asked me that, her response seems somewhat cold.

"In any case, I'll never get myself involved with you again. And with that, we'll come to an agreement".

"I'm thankful for that".

"But before that.....just let me hear your opinion on one last thing".

"Opinion?".

"In order to ascend to Class A, one requires 20 million points individually, you know that right? In order for the whole class to do so, it'll be 800 million points. That ridiculous amount of private points, do you think it's possible to save that much up before graduation?".

"It's impossible. It's something everyone thinks about, yet gives up on in the end".

I replied to her immediately.

"I see. That's right, I guess".

"Is that the last thing you wanted to ask?".

"Yeah, it's over. See you".

Perhaps she had nothing more to say to me, but she shut up and walked off. And with this, I've cut off my connection to Ibuki, or I'd like to think that.....but as long as we'll be together for 3 years, there will be a day where I would not be able to say this.

I had such a premonition.

Part 5

"In various ways, it's been a disaster".

Even as my initial schedule changed partly, I was able to overcome this long half day and it finally seems like I'd be able to successfully return to the dorm. During winter vacation, an outing seems to have danger attached to it as well. First Sakayanagi and Kamuro, then the dispute with Ibuki. I passed by Ishizaki and the others as well.

Checking the time on my phone, it seems like it's almost 3 PM.

"Ahaha. You can say that again---".

As I was walking through Keyaki Mall in order to head back to the dorm, I saw a group of three girls turn the corner and start walking slightly ahead of me. Satou, Shinohara and also Matsushita. All three were students of Class D. They were walking while having a friendly conversation with each other. Since I have plans to meet with Satou the day after tomorrow, my gaze was unconsciously stolen away by her.

I hid my presence so as to not be noticed and kept at a distance where I could pick up their voices. Because if there's any information that could be useful to me I could acquire here, I'd consider it lucky.

"In the end, up until Christmas we couldn't get ourselves boyfriends at all---".

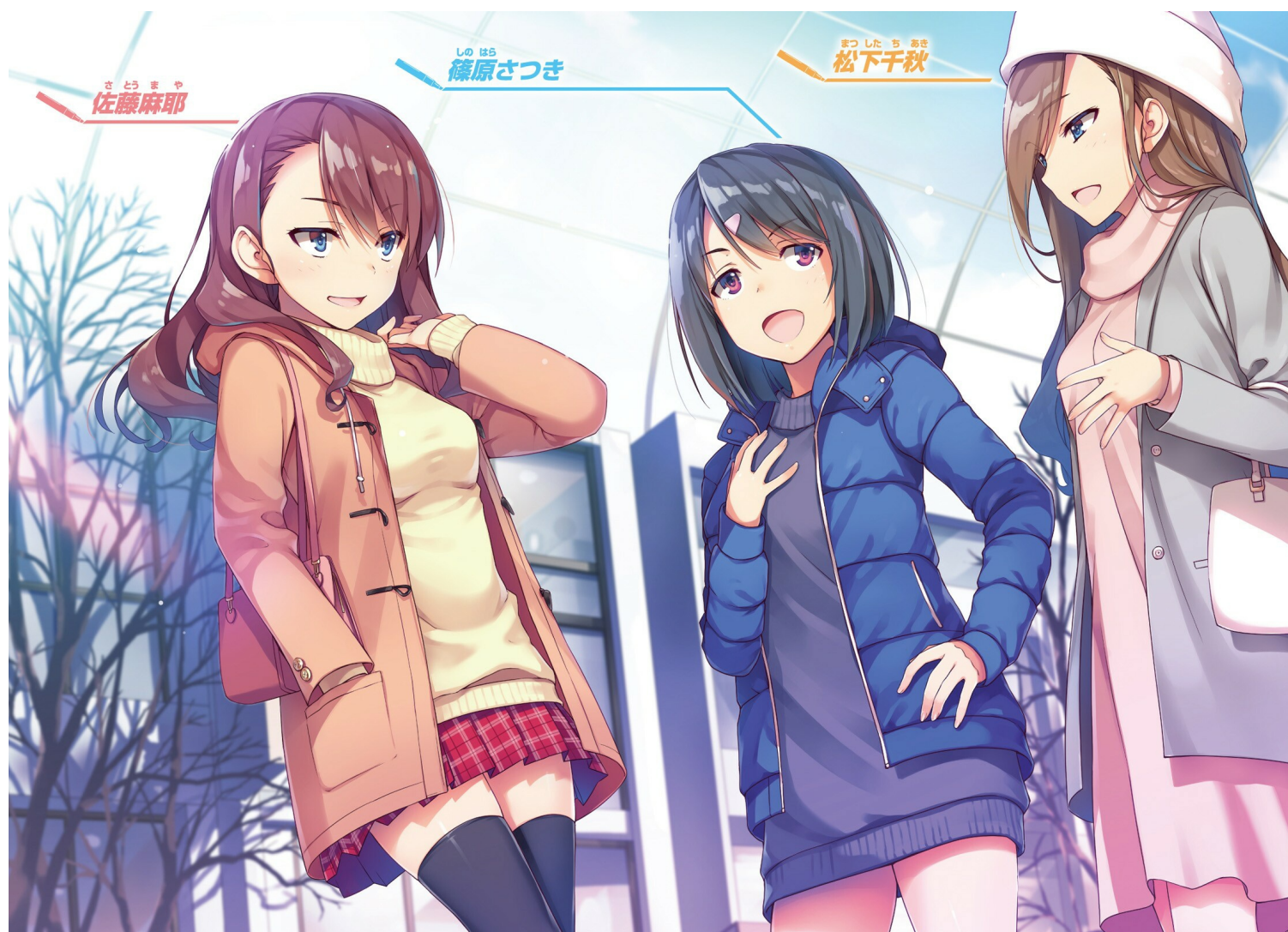
Matsushita said that while looking at the couples surrounding them and sighing.

"Even though if you thought about getting yourself one, you could get yourself one right away. Because you're cute".

Shinohara naughtily chuckles while poking Matsushita's armpit.

"I don't want to date someone so badly to the point I have to compromise".

"That's true too~. But, on second thought, I want a boyfriend".



"Then do you have a boyfriend candidate in mind?".

Towards Shinohara, Matsushita asks that, but Shinohara crossed her arms together and made a complicated face.

"Not at all. First of all our class is catastrophic".

"The one and only ultimate prize has been taken away by Karuizawa-san after all---".

Of course by prize, they mean Hirata.

"Since we've been fighting against other classes all the time during the exams, we barely had any time to make friends. Since it's come to this, I wonder if it'll be better to just go out with a senior student---is what I'm thinking. Really, a university student would be better though".

Matsushita said that her school year is of the question.

"Senior student, huh---. I might be the opposite, I wouldn't want someone older than me. If I'm going to be getting into romance, it'd be with someone my age I suppose".

On the other hand, Shinohara seems to prefer someone from her school year.

"What about you, Satou-san?".

"Ehh? Me? That's right---. Like Shinohara-san, I'd prefer one of my classmates".

"No, no. No one said anything about classmates".

Shinohara immediately denies it. It seems in regards to that, she feels the need to deny it.

"Speaking of which, Satou-san haven't.....you been talking to Ayanokouji-kun?".

Suddenly, my name was uttered. If I suddenly turn to look then it'll be an out with just that. I turned my eyes towards a bookstore beside me, towards a corner of it facing the aisle.

Giving up immediately on following them, I made a change. To increase my distance from Satou and her group too, I decided to kill time here for a while.

"This year's fashionable goods ranking, huh".

From daily necessities to consumer electronics, it seems it's a ranking that includes a variety of familiar things like that. Whether or not this

manufacturer's detergent is good or bad, details like that seem to be written down.

Since I has caught my interest slightly, I took it into my hands and decided to look through it.

".....it might be a good idea to just buy it and go back".

The best cars merchandise summary in the appendix is unnecessary but since it's a bonus I'll just leave it be.

Since I wasn't familiar with the consumer electronics section, it could be useful as reference when I have to buy such goods. For the time being, feeling like Satou and her group have left, I raised my head.

However, for some reason, in my line of sight, Shinohara was standing around alone. It seems the other two have gone to the restroom since Shinohara seems like she's standing by alone in that spot.

For a while longer, it seems like I'll have to rummage through the book. Since I've already taken the goods ranking book into my hands for purchase, I'll look through the other ones as well.

There were quite a bit of customers in the bookstore but, I spotted someone who wasn't fitting in. Indeed, an individual whose behavior makes it seem as though he were about to do something bad. It was Ryuen Kakeru.

He's looking over at the academic books corner. Since I could not see anything except his back, I could not see his expression.

"It doesn't suit him.....".

He didn't have his entourage with him, and looking at his figure standing around alone, somehow it felt lonely. However, despite the fact that just yesterday, he was broken on that rooftop by my hands, for him to boldly go out like this on the very next day, I suppose it's as expected of him.

It's worth it just by being able to confirm that Ryuen is now going out like this. Even if he notices me, our relationship is not one where we can stand around and chat so for now I decided to not approach him.

"Hey, you, you're a 1st year right?".

"Ehh?".

"Weren't you looking at us just now with a glare?".

"N-No. I've never.....I never meant to do that at all.....".

As I was reading through the other books, I heard Shinohara's bewildered voice. As I raised my face from the magazine page, for some reason, a boy and girl pair that looked like they were senior students were glaring at Shinohara as though to box her in. I don't recall the girl but I remember the boy. He's a student from 3rd year Class D and right after enrollment, through the negotiations I brought to the table, he was the student who sold us the answers to the past tests. I had heard that from amongst the 2nd year and 3rd year students, there have been quite a bit of expulsions but even as he ate a set meal of vegetables, he has continued on while avoiding expulsion up until today.

The two senior students were wearing matching couple clothes. Casual clothes with polka dot stripes on them.

On top of that, they were also standing at a distance where their arms were almost touching. There's almost no mistaking that they were lovers.

"You were totally glaring at us. What's wrong is that you weren't looking forward when walking, isn't it?".

"That's enough let's go already.....don't mind her".

The boy doesn't seem to care much about it but his girlfriend seems to be pretty angry.

"I cannot forgive this. For a mere 1st year, you're also Class D aren't you?".

"That is, umm---true but.....but I, wasn't glaring.....".

"Don't you lie to me. Even though you were the one who bumped into us and got angry".

Judging from the situation, it seems either one of them had not been paying attention to their front and their shoulders had bumped into each other, something along the lines of that.

From the fact that neither of them had injuries or had fallen over, it was clear that their contact had not been such a strong one.

"In the first place, you know~. Despite bumping into a senior student, what's with that attitude? Apologize".

"B-but the one who wasn't looking ahead was.....".

"Huh? By any chance, are you trying to say it's my fault?".

Shinohara had been trying to assert her legitimacy, but it seems like she wasn't able to withstand the pressure from a senior student as she reluctantly bowed.

".....no. I'm very sorry".

However, that reluctant attitude of hers was conveyed not only to me but to the senior student as well. The female senior student's fuse had already been lit but it ended up turning into an inferno.

"Huh. Even if you apologize after taking an attitude like that, I can't feel any sincerity from you at all".

"S-Sincerity.....but the one who wasn't looking ahead was, I think, you senpai".

It seems from Shinohara's perspective, before having glared at them or not, it was they who bumped into her.

"Don't fuck around. You were the one who wasn't looking ahead, right?".

"But that's".

It seems from the claims of the senior student, the one who wasn't looking ahead when walking was Shinohara, or that's what she wants to say. It's contradicting Shinohara's own complaints.

But what really happened would be known only to the people concerned as well as witnesses. It may be a situation where it's difficult for Shinohara to reach a resolution on her own.

Perhaps it would be good of me to lend a helping hand. But since it's not like I also saw the moment of collision, it's not like I could judge the truth either.....well it'll work out somehow.

Right after I had thought that and thought to return the book to the shelf, the figure of a certain student could be seen. It seems he's noticed Shinohara being caught up in a problem as he approached her.

Just in case, as I thought that and watched over them, that student called out to Shinohara.

"What are you doing, Shinohara?"

Ignoring the senior students, a classmate boy, Ike Kanji, called out to her like that.

"Ahh.....Ike-kun.....ummm".

It wasn't an 'I'm saved' reaction. If I had to say, it seems like while she's in the midst of waiting for the storm to pass, yet another storm had come to her, Shinohara shows such a bewildered expression.

Normally, Ike is the one bringing the trouble so it's understandable.

"Who are you? Don't get in the way".

Towards the sudden interruption, the female senior student snaps.

"Ahh, no I'm sorry senpai. But, she's my classmate. Did she do something?"

From her tone, it seems Ike has also grasped the situation. He may have been watching the situation from afar, just like me.

"What, you mean? She bumped into us. And on top of that, she held a grudge and glared at us".

"Ahh~ I get it, I get it. I get glared at often by her too".

Giddily laughing, Ike points a finger at Shinohara. Shinohara must have been dissatisfied at that, but it seems she was unable to understand Ike's actions as she looked dumbfounded.

"But, she always has this unpleasant look in her eyes so it makes it look like she's usually always glaring. She doesn't have the courage to glare at senpai, or more like, she was probably just born this way".

Just like that, while mixing in Shinohara's bad traits, he tried to urge the seniors to bury the hatchet. He didn't touch on the matter with the collision, in other words, who was in the wrong.

"And besides, I think it's better not to clumsily cause a ruckus. A teacher was here earlier".

If they're found, trouble will spread like a fire. Like that, Ike cleverly made them listen. Above all else, the biggest point here is that he directed those words not to the girl, but to the boy.

'You understand right?' is what he's saying with his gaze to the boyfriend's side and it looks like it's been effective.

".....let's go already".

Just when Christmas Eve is around the corner, and so he refrained. From the boy's side too, he would probably want to avoid further quarrel. From the perspective of the boyfriend who was against the dispute, it may have seemed like a chance to conclude this. The girl still seemed to be slightly dissatisfied but even so, it seems like her anger has more or less dissipated.

"Hmmp".

Breathing out of his nose like that, the boy starts walking. Somehow they got through this, huh. After the two seniors had left, Shinohara too, breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you.....".

I had thought he would rejoice at having been thanked, but unexpectedly he took a cold attitude.

"No need.....it's no big deal".

He only replied with such short words to her.

"But earlier, you said too much. It's not like I'm always glaring".

"That was a just a way for me to help you".

"Wasn't there a better way for that?".

"I don't know, I'm telling you".

".....well, umm.....t-thank---".

"S-See you. Enjoy your Christmas without a boyfriend!".

"H-Huh!? Even if you had ten thousand years, you still wouldn't be able to find a girlfriend too!".

For some reason, Ike decided to leave that verbal slip behind as parting words and tried to leave the place.

It's probably because he spotted Satou and Matsushita returning from the restroom. However, naturally his departure would end up being seen by those two. Upon meeting back up with Shinohara, the two of them made a dubious face.

"Hmm? That was Ike-kun just now, wasn't it? What happened?".

"Did he bother you again? Why is our class filled to the brim with idiots?".

"N-No, that's not it. You know".

I had thought she would direct her anger towards those two but it seems Shinohara did not make a move to tell them about the incident. And then, quietly, Shinohara looked at the back of the leaving Ike. It seems the problem did not escalate, I should go back too. It doesn't seem like I would be able to pick up any information on Satou here.

Part 6

On my way back with the shopping bag containing the book in hand, I received a call. After confirming the name Hasebe Haruka being reflected on the liquid crystal display, I answered the call.

"Ahh, it's me. It might be sudden but the day after tomorrow, why don't we all gather for a paripi?".

"Ehh? Gather and do what?".

My schedule for the day after tomorrow had already been decided but I inadvertently ended up asking about the word I had never heard before.

"You don't know about paripi? Party people. In short, paripi".

I hadn't realized such a new term had been born. No, in hindsight, I feel like I may have heard someone from our class utter it before. It probably means a gathering of party lovers making merry.

"Christmas isn't only for lovers, would be the main theme for it".

I see. It seems the influence of Christmas isn't limited to only couples. It's something that also affects singles in the surroundings too.

"Sorry. I already have plans for the day after tomorrow".

I did feel like it would be fun but here I have no choice but to decline.

".....yeah? The day after tomorrow is Christmas though, what do you mean by that?".

It's problematic even if she asks what I meant by that but if Haruka and the

others will be playing outside that day too there is also the probability of being seen by them. It would be better if I told her about it honestly.

"I ended up promising Satou I would play with her".

"Satou? Do you mean Satou as in the sugar cube? Are you going to put them in your pocket for your outing?". (TLN: She mentions Satou as being a sugar cube because Satou can also mean sugar in Japanese. Think of the VA Satomi Satou and her nickname of Sugar)

What kind of airhead is she.

"Ehh? Ehh? What, could it be you're going out on a date with Satou-san? On Christmas?".

I didn't even have to explain, naturally Haruka should have understood the meaning of it. However, I should correct her where correction is required.

"It's not like it'll be a date. I'll just be out playing with her".

"People all around the world refer to that as a 'date' though".

That may be so, but as for me, I have no intention of using the word date for this.

"I've declined her invitations many times in the past, so I was asked by Satou to go out on the 25th".

"Nooo, no, no. This is bad, isn't it?".

Of course, since I've enrolled in this school I've also learned about the thing known as society. It's not like I don't understand the meaning behind a boy and a girl going out together on Christmas at all. But the sole reason I accepted Satou's invitation regardless is simply because she chose the 25th as the date and nothing else.

"I'm just confirming this with you but it's not like you're dating her, right?".

"It's the same thing as that time with Shiina. I'm not going out with anyone".

"That's right, I guess. Well, it's not my place to say anything but.....you know,

Airi".

"Airi?".

"The day after tomorrow, if Kiyopon won't be joining us, I think she'll get curious about a variety of things. You can't hide it by feigning sickness either".

I just have to tell her the truth then. It would be simple for me to just say that, but I can't do that.

"I got it. I'll do something about it. The day after tomorrow, where will you be going?".

"Does this mean you'll make your move based on my schedule?".

"There's nothing else to do but that, right? If she happens to see Kiyopon and Satou-san going on a Christmas date, I think that girl might just faint".

It's an exaggeration to say she'll faint, was what I had thought, but since it's Airi that might just happen to her.

Depending on the circumstances, she may even lapse into a severe depression.

As I thought that, on the other side of the phone, Haruka's demeanor changed.

"Could it be, about Airi's feelings.....you've noticed?".

Haruka asks me a question that hit close to the mark.

"Leaving aside whether or not it's exactly as Haruka thought, I at least understand that her feelings towards me are slightly different from the feelings other people have towards me".

"That's a slightly strange way to put it, but I see. It just means you're not that dense. Of course, since you understand that, I won't say anything unnecessary either".

Unnecessary. In other words, 'aren't you going to answer Airi's feelings?', is what she's talking about. If you ask me, Airi is like a baby bird that has just

begun to take its first steps on its own.

Still in a state where it doesn't know a lot of other people, latching onto one of the few members of the opposite sex she's intimate with, in other words me, and directing her affections more or less towards me is something that cannot be helped.

First off, she needs to spend more time together with a large number of males and females and amongst them, she needs to mature.

By doing so, it may give rise to a feeling in her that's different from the romance she sees before her right now. That too, is something that can be said for me as well. What is school, what are friends, and what exactly does it mean to love someone. All these things I still don't understand very well, I cannot make an early decision yet.

"In any case, I'll contact you again, ok?".

"Sorry, for not being able to play with you guys".

I apologized like that, but in response to that, Haruka immediately replied.

"In the first place, we're a group that's gathered together to be outside such restrictions, right? If such restrictiveness were to be strangely strengthened it would cause our group to lose its forte. Gather when we like and decline when we're not feeling it. It's precisely because we're a group capable of doing so that gives it its charm".

Answering like that, Haruka ends the call.

"Certainly, that is true".

If something like an obligation were to be born in regards to invitations, the forte of this group would be lost. I recognized that this is a group I should be thankful for.

Chapter 3: Each Individual's Way of Spending

Part 1

The 24th, it's now Christmas Eve. Today and tomorrow, even as they busy themselves, couples will be spending time together in happiness. On the other hand, for the majority of students though, it may be a day that has nothing to do with them. However, since Christmas Eve will be occurring equally for them as well, I am slightly interested in their way of spending it.

In the early morning, I left my room before 7 o'clock in the morning. Strangely enough, today I have promised to meet up with men on two separate occasions. I had called out to one for a meeting and the other invited me for said meeting, how bizarre.

As I left the dormitory, the entire surroundings had turned white, and made me think of a full-fledged winter.

"So it's something that piles up like this".

The power of nature truly is amazing. Snow was still falling heavily from the sky but according to the forecast, around 7 o'clock it is due to stop falling, so it should stop soon.

Perhaps because the coldness was highlighted visually, but even though the temperature was not that different from yesterday, strangely I felt chilled.

I should consider using gloves and mufflers already. Of course, prior to 7 o'clock during the winter vacation, most of the students were still sleeping in.

"It's cold".

On the bench near Keyaki Mall, naturally there was no sign of anyone. After wiping the snow off the bench, I sat down there. Around the time the snow stopped falling, that man appeared.

"Don't go around calling someone out this early in the morning".

The one who spat that out was the leader of Class C, Ryuen Kakeru. No, former leader. And with a sharp glint in his eyes, he glared at me.

"I wouldn't be able to call you out here if it wasn't a time like this with no one around".

"That's for your convenience. That has nothing to do with me".

It was understandable that Ryuen would curse like that. Certainly, the one who would be inconvenienced by someone witnessing is meeting, is if I had to say, me. A variety of rumors.....or even if not, there's no avoiding a troublesome rumor spreading around.

"So? What business do you have with me?".

"I was thinking we could gossip. If I said that what would you do?".

"Hah. That's a funny joke for this shitty, sleepy morning".

Even though it was still early morning, Ryuen understands well the risk I'm taking.

He's never even once thought, from the start, that this conversation held no meaning.

"Speaking of which, I saw you yesterday. And also, elsewhere, I saw Ishizaki and the others".

It also served as evidence that Ryuen had indeed resigned as leader as he had declared. I cannot rule out the possibility of it being faked, but after seeing Ishizaki and the others, that's not possible. In the first place, there's no advantage to them in making it seem that way to me.

"Are you happy that you were able to prevent me from dropping out of school like you intended?".

"I was impressed. Even though you're alone now, you didn't end up secluding yourself away inside your room".

"I'm free to do whatever I want wherever I want. Or, do you succumb to anxiety whenever you see me? Because you don't know when, with what timing, I'll decide on revenge".

"And I'll regret it then, huh? That I didn't expel you".

Ryuuen places a leg on the bench beside the one I'm sitting on, and boldly sweeps the snow off it. Then, he firmly sat down on it.

"If possible I'd like you to hold off on that. It's for the sake of a peaceful school life as well too, but it's also a bother to fight against you".



If I play along with Ryuen's methods, it'll tire me out more than necessary.

Beaten down by his persistence, I can imagine the state of the ones who had fallen under Ryuen's umbrella.

"Then don't call me out. You're wasting the miracle of me coming out like this".

Let's leave the small talk at this and cut to the chase. If I mess up the timing clumsily, then Ryuen will leave this place without mercy. Not only that, but the continuation of the rooftop may even occur in that case.

"Regarding the rooftop incident back then, I was thinking I'd like to add something".

"Add?".

What are you thinking of now, is what Ryuen is probably thinking. Especially if I'm going to analyze his defeat, it's certainly not something that would be pleasant for him. However, it is vital that I explain to him the parts he missed while conveying the facts to him.

"That place was where the decisive judgement occurred, Ryuen. Probably, if you had been alone there, even now you'd be obsessing over the rooftop incident and you might have been able to fight me again".

But, Ibuki, Ishizaki and also Albert were also there at that place with him. It is also a fact that this was one of the main factors that caused Ryuen to hasten his decision.

If the situation had aggravated, the riskiness rises proportionately. In the worst case scenario, there is the possibility that it won't end with the responsibility being shoved onto Ryuen alone. Not just that instance, he made his surrender after seeing ahead of that. It was a hand worth playing. Of course, I manipulated him into doing that but as far as living up to expectations go, Ryuen has high potential.

"Truly, you're a bastard who's screwing around, I'm amazed at the lengths you go to in taking that attitude of condescension towards your opponents. I thought doing that was my specialty but when you do it like that, I'm going out of business".

"I was only telling you the truth".

"I don't even have to think about how saying that benefits you. It means it has something to do with the fact that you even used Ishizaki and the others to stop me from dropping out, right?".

I had expected him to catch on if I properly carried the flow of the conversation but it seems like the prospects of that are dim.

"You and your craftiness. Do you think I'll still make a move?".

"Move? What do you mean?".

"Don't play dumb. I'm talking about you trying to make me strike at other classes. If not, there's no reason to keep me around in this school".

If I don't use Ryuen, his existence will be nothing more than an impediment. He chose to drop out on his own so if I had left him to his own devices that would have been the end of it, it's easy to think that.

"Is your motivation not coming back? Aren't you the type of man who enjoys conflict?".

"Even if I crush Class B or Class A, as long as you remain, there's no meaning to any of it".

There's no meaning. That's quite a definitive statement.

"What? Has your spirit been broken that much by just one defeat?".

As I said that, Ryuen's eyes lit up with an emotion that resembled slight anger.

"Shall I go on a rampage here then? If that's what you wish".

"I said too much. Please forgive me".

If the matter with Ibuki, Ishizaki and the others didn't exist, I would have probably already been beaten up and sent flying.

This man here doesn't know fear.

Then, he learnt fear.

However, even so, Ryuen would probably coolly stand up and fight here. He has more than enough potential to move forward even as he feels terrified. Of course, this only applies if he remembers to move forward and mature without dropping out of school.

"We've already settled the score between us. From now on, I won't bring up the incident on that rooftop. I promise you this is the last time. Now on top of that, let's talk".

Of course, Ryuen won't believe mere verbal promises. At the very most, this is just being done pro forma, words meant to console him.

"Suspicious. Even if we continue this conversation, it's pointless. I doubt anything beneficial to me can come from this, I'll be taking my leave".

Perhaps his discomfort index has risen, but he moves to leave.

"Not necessarily".

I stopped Ryuen, who made a move to get up. The act of attempting to leave too, looking at it from Ryuen's perspective, may be a strategy meant to draw out my words. It was precisely because he had thought something was up that he left the dorm this early in the morning. He probably had no intention of going back empty-handed in the first place.

Then, without looking at me, Ryuen sat back down.

"You're free to interpret what I'm about to say in any way you like. However, from now on, don't you think it'll be boring if simple battles continue on endlessly?".

Towards me, who kept on continuing with the riddle-like questions, Ryuen seemed frustrated but immediately replied.

"Simple battles, you say?".

"Class D beats Class C, then beats Class B and finally beats Class A. Then joyously, Horikita and the others become Class A. For a story outline, it seems like the popular, easy way out. But, what I'm saying is that we don't need to be hung up on such patterns".

If this were a simple, adventure action picture, we may have properly struck in order of weakness. However, this is reality. There is no such thing as a sequence when it comes to battles.

We're free to start attacking from A or B. It is not out of the question for us to join hands with C, who happens to be our enemy, as well.

"Interestingly enough, it seems starting from the 3rd semester, Class A will be attacking Class B. While the enemy's attention is focused on Class B, it's possible to take them from behind and in one stroke, collapse Class A entirely".

And this would no longer make it a pointless conversation for Ryuen.

"How credible is this information?".

"I don't know. I'd say it's 50-50".

I have to take into consideration the possibility that Sakayanagi may simply be bluffing.

If I'm reading this from the standpoint of her personality, nine times out of ten she'll follow through with it though.

"If this is reliable information, then it can be said to be a good chance. But, I thought you Class D guys have a non-aggression pact with Class B. It's good and all to strike at Class A but while you do that, Class B will be crushed. Ichinose cannot possibly beat Sakayanagi, you know".

"I don't care about who wins and who loses. I don't plan on getting involved".

"So you're just going to let her fall without helping?".

"If she destroys Ichinose for me, it saves me the trouble. Class D may be able to rise up to Class A without effort. And besides, if it's Sakayanagi, she may be able to expel some of them. It's about time I learned what sort of penalties will occur if an expulsion were to happen".

"There's a lot I don't like about this. You don't have any ambition to aim for the upper classes. Aren't you acting under the mentality of not wanting to stand out?".

"That is true. However, there's no inconvenience for me if my surroundings were to act on their own. If we can automatically rise up to Class A, I don't think that's a bad deal".

By surroundings, of course I mean Class A and Class B. And also Ryuen.

"So you'll just be observing without doing anything?".

"There's a problem I need to clean up. There's still a troublesome existence left in our class".

That existence is a person Ryuen knows very well. There's no need to even think about it, the name of that person came out of his mouth.

"Kikyo, huh? Certainly, for you, she's a troublesome one. The way this school is set up, if you have an enemy on the inside, there will be a fair amount of limitations you'll face".

To deal with the protuberance in front of my eyes. Those were my honest thoughts.

There's no longer any need at this point to pay heed to rising up to Class A as well as expulsions occurring within the class but the problem is that, in Kushida's case, the one she's targeting is Horikita.

As for me, since I did something reckless during that rooftop incident, I can no longer make an enemy out of the former student council president Horikita Manabu. As long as he's still enrolled in this school, if his sister Horikita Suzune were to be expelled, that man probably won't forgive me.

In my school life, I'd like to avoid lighting up yellow signal lights.

"A few days ago, Kikyo called me, you know? She asked me when I'd attack. Unfortunately, at the time I was engrossed in my hunt for you and I didn't respond to her but ever since she lost during the test, she's been vigilantly watching out for an opportunity and she doesn't seem like she's given up desiring Suzune's expulsion. Kuku, she's quite an interesting woman".

"If you had used Kushida, you could have dealt a damaging blow to our class, right?".

"If I had wanted to attack Suzune or the class, there was no better material to use. But to crush someone like you who's indifferent about your class, Kikyo is far too weak".

Certainly, if it was an attack against me, then Kushida is greatly insufficient.

"What're you intending on doing? Even if you can temporarily suppress it through the use of medicines, as long as the cancer isn't ablated, it won't be entirely gone. Not even that, it may even metastasize to the other organs, you know?".

Eventually, those organs will decay and die.

"I've already reached that conclusion. There's no need for discussion".

"Hmm? Then let me hear it, Ayanokouji. How exactly are you going to completely suppress Kikyo?".

"Do I need to answer that?".

"Whether this turns out the way you want or not, depends on that answer".

As though he were enjoying himself, Ryuen laughed slightly. But perhaps the pain in his mouth is still present, as his smile instantly disappeared.

It's gotten slightly colder. In this season, staying out too long and getting your body chilled is not a good thing.

"Class D, starting from the 3rd semester, will rise up to Class C. However, in all likelihood, we'll be dropping back down to Class D. Why? Because---I am going to get Kushida Kikyo expelled".

"Kukuku. Kuhahaha!".

Ignoring the pain, Ryuen roared in laughter.

"You truly are a terrifying man. So you're willing to lose a battle in order to win the war. This school is chock-full of useless small fries you can't even get rid of under this troublesome school system. Yet even knowing that, you're going to get her expelled, huh?".

Of course, things aren't that simple. As long as I don't possess the materials required to expel her at present, it will end up having an influence on the contents of the next exam. The presence of a worrisome existence is also a fact.

"Alright. This is more like it, Ayanokouji".

"Are you convinced now? There are things we can cooperate on without having to join hands. Don't you think so?".

"Kuku. You've entertained me with your anti-Kikyo talk. But, me going along with your cajolery and thoughtlessly attacking Class A is a different story".

"I do think it's possible though".

"Don't even bother. Rather than go at it with someone else, I'd rather go for you".

It seems some vigor has returned to the eyes he's staring at me with.

Even after learning fear, there was still a glint in Ryuen's eyes. Our eyes met.

"Ayanokouji, it seems like you're intent on manipulating me even if it requires force, but I have no intention of fighting".

"So it seems".

It appears he's firmed his resolve. Ryuen seems intent on completely disappearing from the front stage. Or perhaps he'll continue making moves behind the scenes.

"Ryuen, let me give you one advice. Your plan of adhering to private points is not a bad one. However, it is also a fact that it is flawed. Even if one or two people can win out, to raise the whole class up through it is impossible".

"That Ibuki, she spilled the beans huh?".

"It's not like she spilled it. She just asked me if it was possible to save up 800 million".

It's not hard to imagine that it was a strategy that Ryuen was attempting to carry out. And the fact that this strategy has no chance of succeeding is something the history of the school lays out.

To save up an estimated amount of 800 million private points is very unrealistic. I had thought Ryuen was attempting to execute a strategy of saving up points either for himself only or for those close to him as well. He only let go of those private points on the rooftop because he had been intent on dropping out, and once he had chosen to remain enrolled, I had expected him to begin acting again to save up private points.

However, judging from Ibuki's state, it appears Ryuen had been saving up private points as part of a strategy to allow his entire class to win out. Certainly, by existing as a tyrant, there is a need to provide appropriate compensation in return, but at the end of the day, he could have made such a thing null and void. Because such a clear promise to do so, should not have remained behind as a record in the first place.

"Or could it be that you were only pretending to be saving up 800 million?".

If he's been deceiving even Ibuki, then this conversation will end with this.

"Even if by any chance, the points you possess right now are exhausted the contract you've made with Class A still remains. Factoring in the 800 thousand points per month, there's still 25 months left to go. Calculations that allow you to barely make it in time for graduation. If you take into account the private points you receive every month, it can save you slightly more time. Don't lust for any more than that".

Now with this, Ryuen can openly follow the system, get promoted up to Class A and graduate. Of course, all of this is based on the premise that Class A does not collapse, and he'll need to avoid any unnecessary expenditure but it's not too difficult a task.

"Ayanokouji. You're certainly very smart and very talented. But even so, you're still far from being perfect".

Not as a joke, but rather as if ridiculing me, Ryuen said that. But his tone was not a joking one. In other words---there is a way to save up 800 million points, is what it would mean.

"Are you telling me you have a secret measure to raise up the whole class, Ryuen?".

"Listen up, the amount of private points being moved around within a year is colossal. Assuming there are no expulsions, each school year has about 160 people. Combining all three school years together add up to 480 people. If I can extort 100,000 points per month from them all, that alone gives me 48 million points. If I can get more than 200,000 points per month it'll add up to 100 million".

If he continues doing that for 8 months, then he'll get about 800 million. Is he saying it's not merely a dream to reach that objective? Even if it's enough according to the calculations, it's not something that's executable. Even a theoretical, impracticable theory has a limit. Even the strategy of utilizing deception and fraud will strengthen surveillance from the school once a large

amount of points begin to move.

Even if all the students successfully got caught in his clever scheme and have points extorted from them every month, 100 million is the limit. As I thought, it's impossible.

Even that 100 million, if it's within the scope of illegality, will be immediately recollected by the school and he'll receive penalties. Even if he musters up his wits, and launches a frontal attack, I wonder just how much he'll be able to save.

Feeling like it's futile, I tried using the abacus again. Assuming the cooperation between all the classes is inevitable, and assuming the class points will be maintained at a high level of 1000 points, then it'll be about 50 million points per year.

If one can overcome the special exams and properly save up points, approximately 10 million points could be accumulated. In other words, within a year, roughly 60 million points.

Even if one does not pointlessly spend and perfectly overcomes the exams, this would be the limit line. 180 million points in 3 years. It won't even reach 200 million points. This is the maximum amount of private points a class can achieve, however, in practice it should be far less than that.

As a more realistic line, getting about 150 million points should be most satisfactory. Or so I had concluded, however, I did not feel like what Ryuen said had any basis. Looking at his face, those were the thoughts that passed through my mind.

"There's no way you could reach that, or rather that's not always the case, huh".

The strategy Ryuen had been focusing on. The strategy I could not see.

"Our methods are similar but the fundamental thought process behind it is different, it seems".

"It's my policy to avoid to the utmost making choices with a low probability of success".

"Ahh. Your strategy which I initially thought had zero chance of success, has risen to above 5%".

However, in order to make it succeed, there are several indispensable things I absolutely require.

"More importantly, Ayanokouji.....you, why is snow piling up on your head?".

Having that be pointed out to me, I returned my gaze to my own appearance.

"Ahh, no, somehow it just ended up like this. Because the sensation of snow feels really good. Is that weird?".

While it had been snowing, I thought it was interesting and remained still, and it had piled up then.

From my head to my shoulders, to my arms and knees, I could see the remaining snow had begun to melt. I was thankful for his pointing it out but I did not make a move to brush it off. Either way, it'll melt and disappear soon enough.

If that's the case, it's not such a bad thing to try touching the snow like this.

"You bastard, you sure like to screw around".

"Now that you've heard what I have to say, it should lead even further now to an alignment of interests".

"Obviously this is too good to be true, but there's also a dangerous scent lingering over this. If you deem it necessary, you will even casually throw away your allies. How can I team up with someone when we're both thinking about backstabbing each other?".

"If you've already thought of that, then there's no need for concern. If you're afraid of being outsmarted, then you simply have to outsmart even that. That's all there is to it, right, Ryuen?".



I'm not asking for a cooperative relationship between two good friends or anything like that. I'm just aligning the interests of both parties. That would, in a sense, give rise to the strongest kind of relationship.

"If so then, Ayanokouji. I'll be the one laying the groundwork in the end".

"Laying the groundwork?".

"It depends on the trend of the 3rd semester, but Class C, no, my class which has fallen down to Class D will most likely be led by Kaneda and Hiyori. They will ultimately be the ones to decide but about attacking Class A, and to not lay a hand on you guys who have risen to Class C, I'll persuade them that those are good plans".

At the very least, it means it's people other than Ryuen who will be deciding on what to do.

"That doesn't sound too bad".

Even if Ryuen backs off, if Kaneda and the others choose to attack us, then to that extent, there's no avoiding that problem.

In particular, Ishizaki and Ibuki don't exactly have a favorable impression of me. It's also possible for them to influence their class into challenging our class.

"However, as a condition for me laying the groundwork, I'll be including the matter from earlier as well. When you guys rise up to Class A, if you'll accept our request then I'll hear you out".

"So it means you'll be manipulating Shiina and the others from behind the scenes?".

"That's impossible. I've already told them I'll be stepping down".

"In other words, just for laying the groundwork alone.....you're overcharging me quite a bit".

Even for a condition of non-aggression, this makes it overwhelmingly inconvenient for me.

"Don't think I'll make a move that cheaply, Ayanokouji".

There's the contract he signed with Katsuragi too, Ryuen knows how to get into his opponent's pockets very well.

"That proposal, I don't mind accepting but you cannot put it on paper. At most, it'll be a verbal promise".

"Kuku. I'm not expecting something like that from you who moves behind the scenes. But you know, if you renege on this I won't forgive you. I'll use whatever means I have to in order to make you regret it".

'If you don't like that, then crush me', I could almost hear him say that.

"I think this may be unnecessary but please let me ask one thing. Even if we settle on a secret agreement here, I can't imagine a 'strategy' being feasible without Ryuen".

Even if it goes up from 0% to 5%, anymore than that requires an appropriate amount of ability and luck. And if there is a person who possesses those, it would have to be none other than Ryuen.

"I don't know that much. The ones who will either seize that opportunity or kill it off are Kaneda and the others".

It seems he's saying he'll only be setting the table at most. This is how the man who used to rule the former Class C through violence and terror takes responsibility. The least he can do to atone, probably something like that.

"The negotiation is complete then".

I made a move to shake Ryuen's hand. Either way, Ryuen is not an existence that's easy to control. Even though he's retired now, if I can manipulate him so that he won't become an obstacle, then that's a good bargain. No, with just this alone, I still cannot afford to be negligent.

"So is this all you have to say? In your initial invitation, you said there was a person you wanted me to meet though. But I don't think a person worth that is amongst the 1st years though".

"That's right. There may be no one like that amongst the 1st years".

"What?".

"It's about time".

Just as the appointed time was imminent, as though he had timed it, that man showed himself from afar.

Seeing that figure, Ryuen coul not hide his surprise at the unexpected visitor. As that man walked his way towards us, he stopped exactly between me and Ryuen.

".....of all people, him? The one you said you wanted me to meet?".

I directed my gaze towards that man without denying the question from Ryuen.

"I'm sorry it had to be this early in the morning".

"I don't mind. This is a good time for a clandestine meeting. Your location of choice isn't bad either".

It's because it's a limited school campus, and it's inside its resource. It's a position where I would be able to immediately spot anyone coming from both the left and right.

If by any chance, someone were to come here, this man would probably pretend to be a stranger and simply walk off.

"You seem pretty close to the former student council president. Was Suzune also useful?".

Including the rooftop incident from a while ago too, Ryuen lightly laughed. Perhaps he had already conjectured that she is the little sister of the student

council president, but it seems he's already investigated it.

"I had thought you'd be alone, Ayanokouji. To think Ryuen would be accompanying you".

Rather than surprised, it was more like he was confirming it with me just in case.

Glancing once at the snow piled up on my head, then not paying it any attention, the older Horikita began to talk.

"Then, I'll be continuing with what I have to say under the assumption that Ryuen Kakeru is also a cooperator. If we go about it leisurely, there's no telling who will spot us after all".

"Wait a minute. Who are you calling a cooperator?"

"At the very least I can guarantee that he's not an external enemy".

Ally, cooperator. I couldn't answer with a lie like that so I answered this way.

"Ayanokouji, when you requested help from me a while back, do you remember the promise you made to me?"

"Yeah. It's about helping you stop Nagumo Miyabi, right?"

"Nagumo? You mean the new student council president?"

The reason I'm with Ryuen right now is because I had wanted him to know about what the older Horikita is thinking as well. Of course, I could have told him about it separately, but having the older Horikita here lay it out for him directly would have a stronger persuasive effect.

"It seems he doesn't like the way Nagumo is doing things".

"I see. So you're contriving to use Ayanokouji to stop Nagumo, huh? It's a famous gossip that the 2nd years are all dominated by that man after all. To deal with him, there's no other option but to use the 1st years. Tell me something, Horikita. Since when did you start eyeing Ayanokouji?"

Towards the older Horikita, Ryuen calls him directly by his name. Not only that, but his attitude was one of condescension. Well, since I'm doing something similar too it's not my place to say.

"Right after he enrolled. On the other hand, it seems you've had quite the hard time finding him".

It probably wasn't in retaliation, but in response to Ryuen, the older Horikita simply answered indifferently like that.

"Kuku. It's because I'm the type who takes his time enjoying the process".

"For all that, you sure got beaten considerably well".

In response to Ryuen, who was taking such a high pressure attitude, he replied as though he were roasting him. It seems Ryuen also sensed that, but he toughened his gaze.

"If you think my skills are lacking then, would you care to test them out right here?".

'Even though I'm injured, I can still take you down', Ryuen provoked him in that spirit.

"I'll have to decline. I have no interest in such things".

The older Horikita responds calmly.

"Kuku. I knew you wouldn't take me up on it".

As Ryuen laughs lightly, he plants his crossed feet on the ground. Right after that, using a frontal kick, he sends snow flying towards the older Horikita's face. The point of it was to blind the opponent.

Looking for the moment where he becomes agitated after his vision is lost from the snow, Ryuen launches his right fist forward aiming for the older Horikita's abdomen.

Towards that, without even giving off the feeling that his vision is obstructed, the older Horikita predicts the attack and completely guards against it. Even as

he falls back, without panicking, calmly, he used his middle finger to adjust his glasses by the bridge.

"I thought you were just an intelligent bastard who only has his craftiness, but you're quite good aren't you?".

Regardless of it having been a surprise attack, towards the older Horikita who blocked it, Ryuuen gave his compliments.

"I believe I told you I'll decline".

"What's the matter? If you dislike it you're free to attack me anytime. Or could it be, you can't fight back against a 1st year?".

"It seems like you've gotten yourself quite a reliable friend, Ayanokouji".

Pan! And with a sound like that, the older Horikita brushes off the snow and dirt on his clothes.

"I was also just thinking that".

But Ryuuen's gaze that would snap at just about anyone did not change.

"Well, that's fine. I'll evaluate you as a man who can get things done to an extent. Horikita-'senpai'".

It's not like it couldn't be taken as sarcasm, but Ryuuen added an honorific.

"Likewise. You're not fit for the student council but I am giving you a certain amount of valuation".

"I'm very happy to be praised by the former student council president".

Not receiving it sincerely, Ryuuen raised his hand and answered as though turning it aside. Since such an interaction between those two has ended, the older Horikita got down to business.

"Now what I want Ayanokouji to do is to protect and maintain order in this school. You can use any means necessary for that. You can remove the student council president Nagumo Miyabi from his throne, or get him exposed in committing a careless action, or just obstruct him, you can choose whatever

method is easier to carry out. Once the 3rd semester begins, Nagumo's real power will strengthen and he'll begin to take action in earnest".

"In detail, how is it going to change? Are you saying the student council has such influence?".

"Of course, the student council is not omnipotent. However, unlike other schools where the student council is just for decoration, it is also a fact that a certain amount of influence is given to this student council. At present, whenever problems occur at school, the student council takes center stage and resolves it. Both Ayanokouji and Ryuen should be aware of that".

During Sudou's assault case too, the ones who presided over the case weren't the faculty but rather the student council headed by the older Horikita.

"And also, the student council has the authority to think about and decide on parts of the special exams too. This year, a survival exam took place on an uninhabited island for the 1st years, but that was something the previous student council thought up being made reality".

In other words, in the special exams, Nagumo can create something entirely different from what we've encountered until now, such a possibility exists, huh?

"He's trying to make the shitty, boring school life you guys have constructed into an interesting one, right? You should welcome it".

Laughing, Ryuen once again crossed his legs.

"If it's the right way, that is. However, up until now, Nagumo has used methods that have led many students to expulsion. As a matter of fact, amongst the 2nd years up until today, there have been 17 students who have gotten expelled.

According to the pre-expulsion interviews, even though you may already know it, more than half of them had Nagumo involved".

17 students. I understand that this is by no means a small amount.

"If he gets that many people expelled, I don't imagine it'll be hard for him to

rule over an entire school year".

There was probably a force that had attempted to stop Nagumo. However, if the tables were turned on them, depending on the situation, that force may be weakened, absorbed and then capitulate.

And then, Nagumo probably succeeded in gaining control over all the 2nd years.

"Now that he's assumed office as student council president, that will extend to the 1st years and 3rd years too. Once next year rolls around, even towards the new 1st years, that influence will become more pronounced is what I predict".

If we leave him alone, it may not simply end with just 10 or 20 people being expelled.

"Isn't Nagumo just being rational? Those 17 students were just worthless people and that's why they got crushed, right?".

"The ones who break the rules will be expelled. That is natural. However, guiding everyone to graduation without losing a single person. Isn't that what an ideal leader is all about?".

"So is Horikita-senpai-sama trying to tell us he hasn't expelled anyone?".

"I was only talking about the ideal. At the very least, at this current stage, no one from amongst the 1st years have been expelled. To pursue that ideal is not a bad thing, right?".

"So he says, Ayanokouji. What do you think about that? About the ideal this man speaks of".

"I can understand it as far as it being an ideal is concerned. It's also fine even if there are people who aspire to it. However, at the very least I can say Ryuen and I are not the types to pursue such an ideal".

"Kukuku. That's exactly right".

If there's someone who meets that criteria right now, it would have to be none other than Ichinose Honami of Class B.

"Of course, I have no intention of desiring that much from you. If you can stop Nagumo's rampage, that's good enough".

He said it simply but if such a thing could be easily done, the older Horikita wouldn't have requested this. If the student council also has their own fair share of power, then all the more, it's not something that can be stopped.

It's because if I act so as to not carelessly cause expulsions, then all I would be able to achieve through my efforts would be to make sure the 1st years don't suffer penalties as well as know the contents of the special exams.

"I'll be taking my leave here. I've been made into a secret sharer too after all".

Apparently, Ryuen has no interest in the happenings of the student council, it seems.

"But it was quite a fascinating talk, but anymore than this is a waste of time. Later".

Perhaps it was a negotiation that was to his satisfaction, but without any hesitation at all, Ryuen headed back towards the dorm.

I called out towards Ryuen's back.

"From now on, are you planning on remaining all alone?".

"Leave me be. From the start, this is my nature, it fits me".

Leaving behind those words, Ryuen left along with the footprints in the snow.

"Ayanokouji, the reason you let Ryuen hear all this, is to turn him into an ally?".

"That's not entirely wrong but.....if I had to say, the goal was more so I could remove myself from being a target of his interest".

I was aiming to appeal to Ryuen that I definitely would not be participating in the conflict between the 1st year classes. If he is made to believe that from now on, I'll be busy planning countermeasures against the student council, the possibility of him bearing fangs against me again would decrease.

Someone warlike such as Sakayanagi who would willingly become an enemy for him should be more entertaining for Ryuen as well. Of course, it does seem like he himself no longer has any desire to fight seriously against anyone anymore though.

"In any case, from now on an understanding friend will also become necessary to you too. In that sense, someone who's gone for a bout with you like Ryuen may be a good fit".

"Friend, huh?".

Well, more importantly than that, right now I should accumulate as much information as I possibly can. Making contact with the older Horikita is, in the same vein as making contact with Ryuen, not something I'd like to frequently engage in.

I'd like to make the most of each and every one of these opportunities.

"I barely have any information on the senior students. Can I rely on you to offer me that?"

"Of course. I've already completed the preparations for that".

Saying that, the older Horikita took out his phone. When I gave him my number, a message immediately arrived. As I scanned through the message, I received an explanation from the older Horikita.

"From amongst the members of the student council, I'll tell you the ones you should keep an eye on other than Nagumo himself. One of them is the newly appointed Vice President from Class B of the 2nd years, a man named Kiriya. Then the Secretary Mizowaki. And then one other, Secretary Tonokawa. Both of these secretaries were former students of Class B who went through thick and thin together with Nagumo and some of the few people capable of offering Nagumo suggestions. Then now, the remaining members".

In the form of a formal resume, something with photographic portraits

attached to it was delivered to me. A glimpse alone was enough to make me understand who belonged to which class. Starting with the Vice President, judging from the number of students currently registered in the student council without belonging to Class A, I can infer just how much power Nagumo wields.

In any case, this information is valuable. It's not an easy task to make contact with students of a different school year. Especially the ones in the student council president's circle, I cannot afford to carelessly take action.

It should have taken a considerable amount of time normally just to gather the information I've acquired right now.

"The only ones who would know about Nagumo's actions and his character in detail are in all likelihood, students from the same school year as him. Even though we're connected through the student council, it's not like I know everything about Nagumo either".

Normally, in order to destroy Nagumo, further information would be vitally required. What kind of character he possesses, what kind of strategy he prefers. It's necessary to grasp such things.

"And since those vital 2nd years are also under Nagumo's thumb, that also seems difficult".

"Exactly.....however, there are students amongst the 2nd years who even now, oppose Nagumo".

He said it as though he had an idea who they were.

"Their name is?".

"Unfortunately, I cannot tell you yet at this stage. It's because I cannot guarantee the safety of that student if their connection to me were to be discovered by Nagumo".

"They'll be branded a traitor and eliminated.....there's a possibility of them getting expelled, is what you're saying?".

"I may be able to protect them while I'm still enrolled, but once I graduate, that protection is gone".

The thing I should be wary of is why the older Horikita is telling me this.

"You intend on doing something to bring me and that 2nd year student into contact, aren't you?".

"If you're up for it, I'd like to name you as a student from amongst the 1st years capable of taking action".

Is what he probably wants to say. As long as they won't reveal their identity, I will have no choice but to provide my name. Even though they're in opposition to Nagumo, they're still 2nd year. Taking next year into consideration, I'd like to avoid carelessly standing out.

"What action to take is up to you".

Normally, declining here would be a good idea.

But, this is dependent on the condition that no one realizes my specs. Or, on the condition that said student won't disclose them. However, as of the current moment, the truth about me has already been leaked to Sakayanagi and the members who were together with Ryuen. In particular, Sakayanagi is a student who knows about my White Room background as well.

The more I attempt to keep it a secret, the more potent a weapon it becomes for Sakayanagi. But there's not much profit to be had in rejecting his proposal here.

"Understood. I don't mind if you tell that 2nd year about me".

"It's a bold choice you've made, but the right one".

"Now all that's left is to see whether your words have any weight to them or not".

There is a reliable student, even if he says that, from the perspective of the other side I'm just a 1st year. Is it ok to rely on someone younger than me? They should be feeling anxious.

"If you won't believe my statements, then defeating Nagumo cannot possibly be done".

"Well, I'll leave it to you".

"Ever since I met you, you've possessed an unbelievable amount of humility".

"Because I'm in your debt, after all".

Of course, this is only the case if I'm obediently obeying the older Horikita and taking action.

As someone who aspires to a peaceful daily life, getting involved with the student council is obviously something I'd like to avoid. Even though I only have to endure this until the older Horikita graduates, there are still things I'm wary of. Does he believe after his graduation, I will protect our promise with integrity and help out in defeating Nagumo?

Such a thing surely isn't the case.

"Do you know what I'm thinking?"

"What happens after I graduate, something like that?"

Well done.

"I didn't expect you to broach the topic yourself. Did you think it more problematic to keep quiet about it?"

"It's because I couldn't see through you and it felt eerie".

"Ultimately, I don't mind even if your cooperation only lasts until my graduation. If by then, the minds of the enrolled students have not changed, then it just means that's it for this school, that's how it is".

"The problem might come before that, you know? What if I cannot stand up to Nagumo?"

"I wouldn't charge someone I believe to be incapable of doing so with something so important".

Does it mean the older Horikita has appraised me as someone capable of stopping Nagumo? Or is he just praising me since even those of low ability can outdo themselves when flattered? Either way, I can't see through this person.

"I'll try thinking up a strategy but I cannot guarantee that I'll be able to produce results before your graduation".

"I understand that".

Why is this man relying this much on an unknown existence like me? If he

wishes to preserve the traditions of Koudou Ikusei Senior High School, then he should have entrusted this to a more passionate individual.

Even as a former student council president who hold pride in his school, this is far too abnormal. In the first place, even after becoming aware of an abnormality like Nagumo, the older Horikita only watched. He did say that it was after I had made myself known but even that makes me slightly uneasy.

"I'm not expecting you to move exactly as I had hoped just from a single debt alone. From the start, you too should have accepted the anti-Nagumo matter with that intention. Am I wrong?"

It seems the older Horikita also properly understands that fact.

"Even though you're the former student council president, you still have a certain degree of authority.....no, influence after all. I had assessed that you would be useful if I had turned you into an ally. Isn't that natural?"

The older Horikita won't abandon his impartial standing and favor me directly. However, there are many cases where cooperation has been acquired through reliance on every important point as long as there is a connection behind the scenes. As long as I'm enrolled in this school, at the very least I'll be facing a variety of risks. At such a time, having built common interests and partner relationships can be useful.

"You're free to rely on me if you wish, but it'll be problematic if you expect too much of me".

"I have no intention of doing so. At the very most, it'll be fine if you helped me out with 'one last try'".

Of course, it would be best if that 'one last try' were to not be necessary.

In any case, the important thing is whether we can own that 'one last try' or not.

"Fine. Because defeating Nagumo probably won't be an easy thing to do after all".

To play along with that troublesome business until the older Horikita graduates and obtaining a trump card for emergencies on the other hand.

"By the way, as for the strategy against Nagumo, I'll be slowly developing it from now. But before that there's something I'd like to confirm. It's about your little sister".

"Whether you use Suzune or not, you're free to decide".

"Not that. I've been in the same class as Horikita for close to a year now, but I think she possesses a certain amount of aptitude. Even though you've had your sister beside you for a long time, haven't you noticed?"

"Aptitude, huh? What does she have that gives her aptitude? Her success in academics? Or the presence of her athletic abilities?"

It seems he's already noticed the parts I've been paying attention to.

"I mean in terms of coordination ability. Horikita does have clumsy aspects to her but overall, her ability is high".

"My sister is incompetent. Always chasing after my shadow, she's made it her goal to catch up to that".

How shallow, he spits that out. However, that phrasing just now was.....

"Could it be.....that being the 'terminal station' for her is the problem?"

"You're free to interpret it however you want. It's not like anything will change just from this alone, right?"

"That may be so".

But with this, I feel like I now understand the reason why the older Horikita acts so harshly towards his sister.

"If your sister were to join the student council, will you give her a 'one last push'?"

"I'll cooperate to what extent I can".

Just by hearing that alone, even though only slightly, clues towards beating Nagumo start to appear.

"I've received the data. I've also managed to grasp the situation, all that's left is for you to take your time and wait".

"I will be doing that. Because it can be said that the future livelihood of the

school is depending on you, after all".

Putting an excessive amount of pressure on me like that, the older Horikita left.

Part 2

After my conversation with Ryuen and the older Horikita, I shifted my schedule and headed back to the dorm. Until the afternoon I leisurely spent time alone in my room, killing time by surfing the net and reading books. And then the next action I took, was to send a message to Horikita.

Having her be nominated for it by the older Horikita and having received his assurance, it's now possible for me to sound her out for the student council. For someone like Horikita, who is basically a loner, she may also be cooped up inside her room much like me.

Somehow, she seems like she'd be weak towards the cold. If so, that would make this easier.

"There's something I'd like to talk about".

Such a message I sent to her was marked as 'read' within a few minutes.

"I don't mind. But would a call suffice? Or do you want to meet in person?".

"In person, I guess. If possible, how about now?".

"I'm at a cafe right now. If you can come here, then I'll hear you out".

Contrary to the image I had, it seems Horikita is currently in the middle of an outing.

I felt slightly troubled by it, but it's better to get troublesome things over with as quickly as possible.

"I'll head over there immediately".

I replied with just that and covered myself with my coat. When I went down to the dorm's lobby, Ike and Yamauchi, and also Sudou, had gathered there. Having come down via elevator and seemingly on their way out, they didn't notice me behind them. As I began walking in the same direction as those three without calling out to them, I overheard their conversation.

"What's up with that, Ken? In the end, Horikita rejected a Christmas date with you".

"Shut up, Haruki. Leave it be".

"In the end, we're going to close off this year without having had any girlfriends, huh. I feel so empty".

"Tch. I'm going to take it nice and slow. It's not like Suzune already has a boyfriend. It's just, how should I put it, she hasn't shown any interest in things like romance yet. From now on, I'll act without rushing it".

Apparently, Sudou has been making a move on Horikita.

However he seems to have brilliantly suffered an honorable defeat.

But far from giving up, he seems to have decided to continue steadily onwards.

"You're an earnest one. Hey, Kanji, do you want to stay the night at the karaoke today? Let's earnestly, enthusiastically sing lonely Christmas songs".

"Ehh, what are you on about?".

"What do you mean what I'm on about? I'm saying we should stay the night at the karaoke today".

"No, sorry Haruki. I can't do that".

"Huh? What do you mean you can't? There's nothing for you to do on Christmas Eve right? Your only lover is your right hand".

".....even I have a variety of things to do".

Ike was obviously agitated, but he did not say the reason why he could not go to the karaoke.

"Oi, could it be, Kanji.....!".

Sudou, who also seemed to have realized the bizarreness of his attitude, closed in on him.

"N-No, it's not like that".

Even though they had not asked him anything in particular, Ike said that in

denial and then told them the reason.

"I'm just going out to have dinner with a friend, that's all.....".

Saying that, Ike averted his gaze and the volume of his voice dropped. The fact that this 'friend' was not a male was something even I, listening from behind them, understood.

And then, a scene from yesterday came to mind.

"Who is it!? Who are you going out with!? Spit it out! Spit it out!".

Having lost his calm, Yamauchi grabbed Ike's collar as he shouted that out.

"I-It's really not that big of a deal.....it's S-Shinohara".

"Shinohara.....you mean, from our class, THAT Shinohara!?".

Having confessed that, Ike nods slightly.

"But why Shinohara? I mean, the two of you are constantly quarreling".

Yamauchi also likely agrees with Sudou's simple question. An unusual combination.

"Like I said, it's only for dinner. There's no way I'd be satisfied with a woman like that, right? She ran into some trouble a while back, and when I saved her, she said she wanted to thank me!".

"No, no, no. I don't know about thanking you or not but it's the Christmas Eve, you know, the Eve!?".

"It's nothing really, I'm serious. Going out with someone like that, even if a cataclysm were to happen, there's still no way I'd do that!".

"I don't believe you! Let's tail them, Ken. Tail them, tail them!".

"You guys, seriously cut it out. It'll be a bother for me if rumors about me and that ugly Shinohara were to spread!".

Ike answered like that, but he didn't seem all that unhappy. Ike and Shinohara, huh? They might unexpectedly be a well-matched couple. Of course, the probability of that happening is, at this point, still an unknown number.

Winter vacation, students crowded Keyaki Mall as though it were a part of their daily lives. My destination was also congested. Since more than 80% of its customers were females, I could not find Horikita right away. As I wandered around inside the shop, I finally spotted her from behind.

"I'm here".

"That was fast".

Right after having had that exchange with Horikita, someone beside her called out to me too.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun".

I've really encountered a truly unexpected pair. Has this ever happened before? For Horikita to be alone together with Kushida. I can't help but think there's a third party present. I used my gaze to scan the surroundings.

"There's no one else here".

As though responding to that, Horikita indifferently answers me. I had thought it was possible that Hirata might have been involved too, but that's not the case either.

"I don't mean to stick my nose into this but.....which one of you invited the other?".

In response to that question of mine, Kushida gently smiled.

"Me. I invited Kushida-san out".

That question was resolved with an answer that I did not think would be the case. No, I suppose this isn't that unnatural. On the contrary, recently, Horikita has been proactively attempting to resolve the problem of her conflict with Kushida. In all likelihood, this gathering too, can be attributed to that. If it were only Horikita here, Kushida would not speak reservedly but in a public location like this, she would have no choice but to wear her mask. Horikita did a good job drawing her out here.

"By the way, Horikita-san, how's it going with Sudou-kun recently?".

"How? What do you mean by that?".

"Aren't you going to spend Christmas together with him---is what I was thinking?".

"There's no way I would do something like that".

She flatly replied like that.

"Really? Didn't Sudou-kun ask you out?".

"Isn't that something irrelevant right now?".

Kushida had attempted to use my interjection to change the flow of the conversation here but that was prevented by Horikita.

Horikita, who by nature, already possessed a bullish attitude, is using two points: her predominance from having won during the test and the fact that it's a public cafe to lay siege to the impregnable fortress that is Kushida.

"And also, Ayanokouji-kun. How much longer do you intend to stand around? If you have something to say, would you mind getting on with it?".

'Right now I'm busy talking to Kushida', is what she seems like she wants to say.

As a matter of fact, looking at it from Horikita's perspective, this is a valuable occasion.

"Sorry. I didn't expect someone else to be present too. I'll leave it for next time".

I decided to leave since I was clearly unneeded here. However, because it was a moment like this that, on the contrary, Kushida judged that my presence was welcome.

"Isn't it fine, Horikita-san? If it's all the same, let's have Ayanokouji-kun join us for tea?".

She said that and stopped me from leaving. However, receiving the pressure of Horikita's silence, I didn't have the guts to calmly sit down.

"Maybe next time".

I said that and hurriedly tried to break away.

"Wait. I'll hear you out here".

"No, it'll be a completely unrelated matter".

Since I disliked the idea of Kushida overhearing unnecessary things, I tried to escape like that. Recently, I've been telling various people about the circumstances at hand but as far as this case is concerned, there are absolutely no benefits in letting her know. Not even that, there's nothing but a mass of disadvantages in this case.

"Could it be, that it's something you don't want her to overhear?".

I got pointed out like that by the sharp Horikita.

"Is that true, Ayanokouji-kun?".

Kushida looks at me with sad eyes. Of course, I had every intention of denying it immediately.

However, Horikita came around again as if to seal that off.

"I'm sorry but she's also a member of our class. Keeping secrets like that is unnecessary".

"That's not it. This has nothing to do with the class. At best, this is between me and Horikita as individuals".

"I see. Then I don't mind. This has something to do with me, right? Say it here".

"I'll have to decline".

"Then, what you have to say right now, I'll never hear you out elsewhere".

Apparently, Horikita's resolve has been firmed. Perhaps she thinks speaking with me without hiding anything is the first step towards improving her relationship with Kushida.

As always, Kushida's expression was overflowing with kindness.

No matter how many times one gets lured into a swamp and no matter how many times one comes close to dying from it, just by seeing that smile of hers, 'maybe this time' is something they'd end up thinking.

I may be able to convince them here by fabricating an appropriate story. But, I doubt Horikita, who is on guard now, will be accepting the proposal I am about

to tell her in the future either.

"Understood. Then I'll be speaking frankly. Is that fine?"

"Yes. Tell me".

"Do you have any intention of joining the student council?"

No use crying over spilt milk. I don't know how Horikita will take this. I stated my business as it is.

".....I'm sorry, but I'm not keeping up".

She tilted her head as if to ask why I'm saying this to her.

"Isn't the context deeply lacking? Why did you say that?"

"I wanted to talk more about that as well".

"Very well, continue".

"Umm, is it fine, Horikita-san?"

The one who interrupted me was Kushida.

"Fine? What do you mean by that?"

"It's about the student council, so I think Horikita-san's brother might also be involved in this matter. Is it ok even if I end up hearing this?"

"Ever since middle school, you've known about my brother. What are you saying now after all this time?"

The reason Horikita used her brother as a witness, too, is related to the fact that Kushida is aware of their relationship as siblings. As long as it's not something to hide she'll be using it effectively, is what she means, huh?

This isn't something that'll be over quickly. I firmed my resolve and took a seat beside the two of them.

"A certain person desires your induction into the student council".

"A certain person?"

".....your brother".

Of course, strictly speaking, the older Horikita requested no such thing. He

only told me I was free to choose whether to use Horikita, or to not use her. However, to make Horikita take action, I have no other choice but to use her brother.

"Why is my brother telling me to join the student council? That sounds absurd".

Looking slightly dissatisfied, Horikita repudiates it.

"It's the truth".

"If it really were the truth, then my brother should have told me this directly. Why did he go through you?"

"Do you think that brother is the type to tell you directly?"

"I don't. In the first place, he's not one to say things like join the student council".

In other words, Horikita did not believe my words from the very beginning.

If it's a sibling relationship that has frozen up to this extent, it would only be interpreted as a lie. However, even so, Kushida's existence is unnecessary if I'm to deal fully with the truth.

Once the 3rd semester begins, she'll learn of Ryuen's downfall and she may become convinced that I'm the one behind the secret maneuvers. If that happens, it'll get even more troublesome. Leaving aside that this would have inevitably happened, such a time does not necessarily have to be now.

"I have no intention of playing along with your lies. What exactly is your point?"

"It's the truth. If you think I'm lying to you, why don't you directly confirm it for yourself?"

I changed the subject from a lie I cut in with to the truth.

"You're acting rather bullishly.....".

"Bullish or not, you're doubting me right? Then you can just contact him".

"Then you, umm, you know my brother's contact number?"

"I don't know but since you're his sister, isn't it obvious for you to know?"

"I don't know".

"If you don't mind, shall we try contacting Tachibana-senpai?"

"Tachibana, she's the one who acts as my brother's secretary?"

"Yep. I've talked with Tachibana-senpai many times before, I know her contact number".

As expected of Kushida, it seems she's been making friends even in unexpected places.

"It's ok even if I really confirm it, right, Ayanokouji-kun? If it turns out to be a lie, the consequences will be heavy".

"Please do as you wish".

Either way, if the older Horikita realizes my strategy, he'll match it accordingly. Everything Horikita tries to confirm will be rewritten into truth.

"Thank you, senpai. Yes, please excuse me".

Having finished calling, Kushida began to operate her phone. Soon afterwards, Horikita's phone briefly rings. Apparently she's successfully acquired the older Horikita's contact number, and has forwarded it to Horikita.

"Thank you, Kushida-san".

"No, you're welcome".

Even though there were people around, having to show such a friendly response to Horikita must have been hard for her.

It's impressive that she didn't let any of it show. Horikita drops her gaze down to her phone's screen. And I had thought she would call immediately, but her hands did not move and she kept on gripping her phone in both hands.

".....fuu".

A deep sigh, no, a deep breath.

To be this nervous from just calling your family is not normal.

"If everything turns out to be a lie.....you should prepare yourself".

"No need for caution".

This is Horikita's gamble.

There's no way her brother could possibly be telling her to join the student council. Yet the fact that I'm brimming with confidence concerns her. Even as she thinks this may just be a bluff, she also thinks it may be the truth. If she could somehow confirm the truth without having to directly contact her brother, that would be ideal for her, but that's an impossible task. Horikita, who could not bring herself to trust me, firmed her resolve and pressed the call button. For a few seconds she pressed the phone to her ear.

Perhaps the person on the other end of the line answered, but the fact that Horikita had become even more nervous was conveyed.

"Ahh, umm, i-it's me. It's Horikita Suzune".

Horikita speaks in a formal manner.

"I asked Tachibana-senpai for your contact number, umm, and I called you, nii-san".

Then, showing us a flustered look that one cannot usually see on Horikita (even though she herself probably doesn't wish to let us see), she asked the necessary question.

Then, she was probably told that the induction into the student council matter I was talking to her about earlier was true.

"Yes, t-thank you very much. Please excuse me".

A pause after ending the call, then she intensely glared at me.

"It was the truth, wasn't it? Why do I have to be glared at?".

"Why are you acting the role of the bridge? It's because that's baffling to me".

It's a truly easy-to-understand matter. Certainly, no matter who looks at it, it's unnatural.

"Horikita-san, are you going to be joining the student council?".

".....no. I won't be joining".

"Hold up. Your brother told you to join, didn't he?".

"To join would be for my sake, is what he told me. But.....I doubt joining the

student council will be for my own sake".

Even if it happened to be the wish of an absolute existence like her brother, Horikita seems to have no intention of going along with it. Even if I persist any further here, there's nothing to be gained.

I'd like to stop giving Kushida unnecessary information at this point.

"I got it. For the time being, please give me another chance to talk to you again next time".

"I wonder. I think it'll just be a waste of time though?".

"Probably".

It seems Horikita has also realized that I've made a move to end this, as she didn't do anything to stop me. What's important right now is to connect to her again. As long as Kushida is here, I cannot continue speaking any further.

"See you later, Ayanokouji-kun".

From Kushida who gently called out to me like that, I felt something unusual.

Part 3

The 24th, it's now Christmas Eve. Today and tomorrow, even as they busy themselves, couples will be spending time together in happiness. On the other hand, for the majority of students though, it may be a day that has nothing to do with them. However, since Christmas Eve will be occurring equally for them as well, I am slightly interested in their way of spending it.

In the early morning, I left my room before 7 o'clock in the morning. Strangely enough, today I have promised to meet up with men on two separate occasions. I had called out to one for a meeting and the other invited me for said meeting, how bizarre.

As I left the dormitory, the entire surroundings had turned white, and made me think of a full-fledged winter.

"So it's something that piles up like this".

The power of nature truly is amazing. Snow was still falling heavily from the

sky but according to the forecast, around 7 o'clock it is due to stop falling, so it should stop soon.

Perhaps because the coldness was highlighted visually, but even though the temperature was not that different from yesterday, strangely I felt chilled.

I should consider using gloves and mufflers already. Of course, prior to 7 o'clock during the winter vacation, most of the students were still sleeping in.

"It's cold".

On the bench near Keyaki Mall, naturally there was no sign of anyone. After wiping the snow off the bench, I sat down there. Around the time the snow stopped falling, that man appeared.

"Don't go around calling someone out this early in the morning".

The one who spat that out was the leader of Class C, Ryuen Kakeru. No, former leader. And with a sharp glint in his eyes, he glared at me.

"I wouldn't be able to call you out here if it wasn't a time like this with no one around".

"That's for your convenience. That has nothing to do with me".

It was understandable that Ryuen would curse like that. Certainly, the one who would be inconvenienced by someone witnessing is meeting, is if I had to say, me. A variety of rumors.....or even if not, there's no avoiding a troublesome rumor spreading around.

"So? What business do you have with me?".

"I was thinking we could gossip. If I said that what would you do?".

"Hah. That's a funny joke for this shitty, sleepy morning".

Even though it was still early morning, Ryuen understands well the risk I'm taking.

He's never even once thought, from the start, that this conversation held no meaning.

"Speaking of which, I saw you yesterday. And also, elsewhere, I saw Ishizaki and the others".

It also served as evidence that Ryuen had indeed resigned as leader as he had declared. I cannot rule out the possibility of it being faked, but after seeing Ishizaki and the others, that's not possible. In the first place, there's no advantage to them in making it seem that way to me.

"Are you happy that you were able to prevent me from dropping out of school like you intended?"

"I was impressed. Even though you're alone now, you didn't end up secluding yourself away inside your room".

"I'm free to do whatever I want wherever I want. Or, do you succumb to anxiety whenever you see me? Because you don't know when, with what timing, I'll decide on revenge".

"And I'll regret it then, huh? That I didn't expel you".

Ryuen places a leg on the bench beside the one I'm sitting on, and boldly sweeps the snow off it. Then, he firmly sat down on it.

"If possible I'd like you to hold off on that. It's for the sake of a peaceful school life as well too, but it's also a bother to fight against you".

If I play along with Ryuen's methods, it'll tire me out more than necessary.

Beaten down by his persistence, I can imagine the state of the ones who had fallen under Ryuen's umbrella.

"Then don't call me out. You're wasting the miracle of me coming out like this".

Let's leave the small talk at this and cut to the chase. If I mess up the timing clumsily, then Ryuen will leave this place without mercy. Not only that, but the continuation of the rooftop may even occur in that case.

"Regarding the rooftop incident back then, I was thinking I'd like to add something".

"Add?"

What are you thinking of now, is what Ryuen is probably thinking. Especially if I'm going to analyze his defeat, it's certainly not something that would be pleasant for him. However, it is vital that I explain to him the parts he missed

while conveying the facts to him.

"That place was where the decisive judgement occurred, Ryuen. Probably, if you had been alone there, even now you'd be obsessing over the rooftop incident and you might have been able to fight me again".

But, Ibuki, Ishizaki and also Albert were also there at that place with him. It is also a fact that this was one of the main factors that caused Ryuen to hasten his decision.

If the situation had aggravated, the riskiness rises proportionately. In the worst case scenario, there is the possibility that it won't end with the responsibility being shoved onto Ryuen alone. Not just that instance, he made his surrender after seeing ahead of that. It was a hand worth playing. Of course, I manipulated him into doing that but as far as living up to expectations go, Ryuen has high potential.

"Truly, you're a bastard who's screwing around, I'm amazed at the lengths you go to in taking that attitude of condescension towards your opponents. I thought doing that was my specialty but when you do it like that, I'm going out of business".

"I was only telling you the truth".

"I don't even have to think about how saying that benefits you. It means it has something to do with the fact that you even used Ishizaki and the others to stop me from dropping out, right?".

I had expected him to catch on if I properly carried the flow of the conversation but it seems like the prospects of that are dim.

"You and your craftiness. Do you think I'll still make a move?".

"Move? What do you mean?".

"Don't play dumb. I'm talking about you trying to make me strike at other classes. If not, there's no reason to keep me around in this school".

If I don't use Ryuen, his existence will be nothing more than an impediment. He chose to drop out on his own so if I had left him to his own devices that would have been the end of it, it's easy to think that.

"Is your motivation not coming back? Aren't you the type of man who enjoys conflict?".

"Even if I crush Class B or Class A, as long as you remain, there's no meaning to any of it".

There's no meaning. That's quite a definitive statement.

"What? Has your spirit been broken that much by just one defeat?".

As I said that, Ryuen's eyes lit up with an emotion that resembled slight anger.

"Shall I go on a rampage here then? If that's what you wish".

"I said too much. Please forgive me".

If the matter with Ibuki, Ishizaki and the others didn't exist, I would have probably already been beaten up and sent flying.

This man here doesn't know fear.

Then, he learnt fear.

However, even so, Ryuen would probably coolly stand up and fight here. He has more than enough potential to move forward even as he feels terrified. Of course, this only applies if he remembers to move forward and mature without dropping out of school.

"We've already settled the score between us. From now on, I won't bring up the incident on that rooftop. I promise you this is the last time. Now on top of that, let's talk".

Of course, Ryuen won't believe mere verbal promises. At the very most, this is just being done pro forma, words meant to console him.

"Suspicious. Even if we continue this conversation, it's pointless. I doubt anything beneficial to me can come from this, I'll be taking my leave".

Perhaps his discomfort index has risen, but he moves to leave.

"Not necessarily".

I stopped Ryuen, who made a move to get up. The act of attempting to leave too, looking at it from Ryuen's perspective, may be a strategy meant to draw

out my words. It was precisely because he had thought something was up that he left the dorm this early in the morning. He probably had no intention of going back empty-handed in the first place.

Then, without looking at me, Ryuen sat back down.

"You're free to interpret what I'm about to say in any way you like. However, from now on, don't you think it'll be boring if simple battles continue on endlessly?"

Towards me, who kept on continuing with the riddle-like questions, Ryuen seemed frustrated but immediately replied.

"Simple battles, you say?"

"Class D beats Class C, then beats Class B and finally beats Class A. Then joyously, Horikita and the others become Class A. For a story outline, it seems like the popular, easy way out. But, what I'm saying is that we don't need to be hung up on such patterns".

If this were a simple, adventure action picture, we may have properly struck in order of weakness. However, this is reality. There is no such thing as a sequence when it comes to battles.

We're free to start attacking from A or B. It is not out of the question for us to join hands with C, who happens to be our enemy, as well.

"Interestingly enough, it seems starting from the 3rd semester, Class A will be attacking Class B. While the enemy's attention is focused on Class B, it's possible to take them from behind and in one stroke, collapse Class A entirely".

And this would no longer make it a pointless conversation for Ryuen.

"How credible is this information?"

"I don't know. I'd say it's 50-50".

I have to take into consideration the possibility that Sakayanagi may simply be bluffing.

If I'm reading this from the standpoint of her personality, nine times out of ten she'll follow through with it though.

"If this is reliable information, then it can be said to be a good chance. But, I thought you Class D guys have a non-aggression pact with Class B. It's good and all to strike at Class A but while you do that, Class B will be crushed. Ichinose cannot possibly beat Sakayanagi, you know".

"I don't care about who wins and who loses. I don't plan on getting involved".

"So you're just going to let her fall without helping?".

"If she destroys Ichinose for me, it saves me the trouble. Class D may be able to rise up to Class A without effort. And besides, if it's Sakayanagi, she may be able to expel some of them. It's about time I learned what sort of penalties will occur if an expulsion were to happen".

"There's a lot I don't like about this. You don't have any ambition to aim for the upper classes. Aren't you acting under the mentality of not wanting to stand out?".

"That is true. However, there's no inconvenience for me if my surroundings were to act on their own. If we can automatically rise up to Class A, I don't think that's a bad deal".

By surroundings, of course I mean Class A and Class B. And also Ryuen.

"So you'll just be observing without doing anything?".

"There's a problem I need to clean up. There's still a troublesome existence left in our class".

That existence is a person Ryuen knows very well. There's no need to even think about it, the name of that person came out of his mouth.

"Kikyo, huh? Certainly, for you, she's a troublesome one. The way this school is set up, if you have an enemy on the inside, there will be a fair amount of limitations you'll face".

To deal with the protuberance in front of my eyes. Those were my honest thoughts.

There's no longer any need at this point to pay heed to rising up to Class A as well as expulsions occurring within the class but the problem is that, in Kushida's case, the one she's targeting is Horikita.

As for me, since I did something reckless during that rooftop incident, I can no longer make an enemy out of the former student council president Horikita Manabu. As long as he's still enrolled in this school, if his sister Horikita Suzune were to be expelled, that man probably won't forgive me.

In my school life, I'd like to avoid lighting up yellow signal lights.

"A few days ago, Kikyo called me, you know? She asked me when I'd attack. Unfortunately, at the time I was engrossed in my hunt for you and I didn't respond to her but ever since she lost during the test, she's been vigilantly watching out for an opportunity and she doesn't seem like she's given up desiring Suzune's expulsion. Kuku, she's quite an interesting woman".

"If you had used Kushida, you could have dealt a damaging blow to our class, right?".

"If I had wanted to attack Suzune or the class, there was no better material to use. But to crush someone like you who's indifferent about your class, Kikyo is far too weak".

Certainly, if it was an attack against me, then Kushida is greatly insufficient.

"What're you intending on doing? Even if you can temporarily suppress it through the use of medicines, as long as the cancer isn't ablated, it won't be entirely gone. Not even that, it may even metastasize to the other organs, you know?".

Eventually, those organs will decay and die.

"I've already reached that conclusion. There's no need for discussion".

"Hmm? Then let me hear it, Ayanokouji. How exactly are you going to completely suppress Kikyo?".

"Do I need to answer that?".

"Whether this turns out the way you want or not, depends on that answer".

As though he were enjoying himself, Ryuen laughed slightly. But perhaps the pain in his mouth is still present, as his smile instantly disappeared.

It's gotten slightly colder. In this season, staying out too long and getting your body chilled is not a good thing.

"Class D, starting from the 3rd semester, will rise up to Class C. However, in all likelihood, we'll be dropping back down to Class D. Why? Because---I am going to get Kushida Kikyo expelled".

"Kukuku. Kuhahaha!".

Ignoring the pain, Ryuen roared in laughter.

"You truly are a terrifying man. So you're willing to lose a battle in order to win the war. This school is chock-full of useless small fries you can't even get rid of under this troublesome school system. Yet even knowing that, you're going to get her expelled, huh?".

Of course, things aren't that simple. As long as I don't possess the materials required to expel her at present, it will end up having an influence on the contents of the next exam. The presence of a worrisome existence is also a fact.

"Alright. This is more like it, Ayanokouji".

"Are you convinced now? There are things we can cooperate on without having to join hands. Don't you think so?".

"Kuku. You've entertained me with your anti-Kikyo talk. But, me going along with your cajolery and thoughtlessly attacking Class A is a different story".

"I do think it's possible though".

"Don't even bother. Rather than go at it with someone else, I'd rather go for you".

It seems some vigor has returned to the eyes he's staring at me with.

Even after learning fear, there was still a glint in Ryuen's eyes. Our eyes met.

"Ayanokouji, it seems like you're intent on manipulating me even if it requires force, but I have no intention of fighting".

"So it seems".

It appears he's firmed his resolve. Ryuen seems intent on completely disappearing from the front stage. Or perhaps he'll continue making moves behind the scenes.

"Ryuen, let me give you one advice. Your plan of adhering to private points is

not a bad one. However, it is also a fact that it is flawed. Even if one or two people can win out, to raise the whole class up through it is impossible".

"That Ibuki, she spilled the beans huh?".

"It's not like she spilled it. She just asked me if it was possible to save up 800 million".

It's not hard to imagine that it was a strategy that Ryuen was attempting to carry out. And the fact that this strategy has no chance of succeeding is something the history of the school lays out.

To save up an estimated amount of 800 million private points is very unrealistic. I had thought Ryuen was attempting to execute a strategy of saving up points either for himself only or for those close to him as well. He only let go of those private points on the rooftop because he had been intent on dropping out, and once he had chosen to remain enrolled, I had expected him to begin acting again to save up private points.

However, judging from Ibuki's state, it appears Ryuen had been saving up private points as part of a strategy to allow his entire class to win out. Certainly, by existing as a tyrant, there is a need to provide appropriate compensation in return, but at the end of the day, he could have made such a thing null and void. Because such a clear promise to do so, should not have remained behind as a record in the first place.

"Or could it be that you were only pretending to be saving up 800 million?".

If he's been deceiving even Ibuki, then this conversation will end with this.

"Even if by any chance, the points you possess right now are exhausted the contract you've made with Class A still remains. Factoring in the 800 thousand points per month, there's still 25 months left to go. Calculations that allow you to barely make it in time for graduation. If you take into account the private points you receive every month, it can save you slightly more time. Don't lust for any more than that".

Now with this, Ryuen can openly follow the system, get promoted up to Class A and graduate. Of course, all of this is based on the premise that Class A does not collapse, and he'll need to avoid any unnecessary expenditure but it's

not too difficult a task.

"Ayanokouji. You're certainly very smart and very talented. But even so, you're still far from being perfect".

Not as a joke, but rather as if ridiculing me, Ryuen said that. But his tone was not a joking one. In other words---there is a way to save up 800 million points, is what it would mean.

"Are you telling me you have a secret measure to raise up the whole class, Ryuen?".

"Listen up, the amount of private points being moved around within a year is colossal. Assuming there are no expulsions, each school year has about 160 people. Combining all three school years together add up to 480 people. If I can extort 100,000 points per month from them all, that alone gives me 48 million points. If I can get more than 200,000 points per month it'll add up to 100 million".

If he continues doing that for 8 months, then he'll get about 800 million. Is he saying it's not merely a dream to reach that objective? Even if it's enough according to the calculations, it's not something that's executable. Even a theoretical, impracticable theory has a limit. Even the strategy of utilizing deception and fraud will strengthen surveillance from the school once a large amount of points begin to move.

Even if all the students successfully got caught in his clever scheme and have points extorted from them every month, 100 million is the limit. As I thought, it's impossible.

Even that 100 million, if it's within the scope of illegality, will be immediately recollected by the school and he'll receive penalties. Even if he musters up his wits, and launches a frontal attack, I wonder just how much he'll be able to save.

Feeling like it's futile, I tried using the abacus again. Assuming the cooperation between all the classes is inevitable, and assuming the class points will be maintained at a high level of 1000 points, then it'll be about 50 million points per year.

If one can overcome the special exams and properly save up points, approximately 10 million points could be accumulated. In other words, within a year, roughly 60 million points.

Even if one does not pointlessly spend and perfectly overcomes the exams, this would be the limit line. 180 million points in 3 years. It won't even reach 200 million points. This is the maximum amount of private points a class can achieve, however, in practice it should be far less than that.

As a more realistic line, getting about 150 million points should be most satisfactory. Or so I had concluded, however, I did not feel like what Ryuen said had any basis. Looking at his face, those were the thoughts that passed through my mind.

"There's no way you could reach that, or rather that's not always the case, huh".

The strategy Ryuen had been focusing on. The strategy I could not see.

"Our methods are similar but the fundamental thought process behind it is different, it seems".

"It's my policy to avoid to the utmost making choices with a low probability of success".

"Ahh. Your strategy which I initially thought had zero chance of success, has risen to above 5%".

However, in order to make it succeed, there are several indispensable things I absolutely require.

"More importantly, Ayanokouji.....you, why is snow piling up on your head?".

Having that be pointed out to me, I returned my gaze to my own appearance.

"Ahh, no, somehow it just ended up like this. Because the sensation of snow feels really good. Is that weird?".

While it had been snowing, I thought it was interesting and remained still, and it had piled up then.

From my head to my shoulders, to my arms and knees, I could see the remaining snow had begun to melt. I was thankful for his pointing it out but I

did not make a move to brush it off. Either way, it'll melt and disappear soon enough.

If that's the case, it's not such a bad thing to try touching the snow like this.

"You bastard, you sure like to screw around".

"Now that you've heard what I have to say, it should lead even further now to an alignment of interests".

"Obviously this is too good to be true, but there's also a dangerous scent lingering over this. If you deem it necessary, you will even casually throw away your allies. How can I team up with someone when we're both thinking about backstabbing each other?".

"If you've already thought of that, then there's no need for concern. If you're afraid of being outsmarted, then you simply have to outsmart even that. That's all there is to it, right, Ryuen?".

I'm not asking for a cooperative relationship between two good friends or anything like that. I'm just aligning the interests of both parties. That would, in a sense, give rise to the strongest kind of relationship.

"If so then, Ayanokouji. I'll be the one laying the groundwork in the end".

"Laying the groundwork?".

"It depends on the trend of the 3rd semester, but Class C, no, my class which has fallen down to Class D will most likely be led by Kaneda and Hiyori. They will ultimately be the ones to decide but about attacking Class A, and to not lay a hand on you guys who have risen to Class C, I'll persuade them that those are good plans".

At the very least, it means it's people other than Ryuen who will be deciding on what to do.

"That doesn't sound too bad".

Even if Ryuen backs off, if Kaneda and the others choose to attack us, then to that extent, there's no avoiding that problem.

In particular, Ishizaki and Ibuki don't exactly have a favorable impression of me. It's also possible for them to influence their class into challenging our class.

"However, as a condition for me laying the groundwork, I'll be including the matter from earlier as well. When you guys rise up to Class A, if you'll accept our request then I'll hear you out".

"So it means you'll be manipulating Shiina and the others from behind the scenes?".

"That's impossible. I've already told them I'll be stepping down".

"In other words, just for laying the groundwork alone.....you're overcharging me quite a bit".

Even for a condition of non-aggression, this makes it overwhelmingly inconvenient for me.

"Don't think I'll make a move that cheaply, Ayanokouji".

There's the contract he signed with Katsuragi too, Ryuen knows how to get into his opponent's pockets very well.

"That proposal, I don't mind accepting but you cannot put it on paper. At most, it'll be a verbal promise".

"Kuku. I'm not expecting something like that from you who moves behind the scenes. But you know, if you renege on this I won't forgive you. I'll use whatever means I have to in order to make you regret it".

'If you don't like that, then crush me', I could almost hear him say that.

"I think this may be unnecessary but please let me ask one thing. Even if we settle on a secret agreement here, I can't imagine a 'strategy' being feasible without Ryuen".

Even if it goes up from 0% to 5%, anymore than that requires an appropriate amount of ability and luck. And if there is a person who possesses those, it would have to be none other than Ryuen.

"I don't know that much. The ones who will either seize that opportunity or kill it off are Kaneda and the others".

It seems he's saying he'll only be setting the table at most. This is how the man who used to rule the former Class C through violence and terror takes responsibility. The least he can do to atone, probably something like that.

"The negotiation is complete then".

I made a move to shake Ryuen's hand. Either way, Ryuen is not an existence that's easy to control. Even though he's retired now, if I can manipulate him so that he won't become an obstacle, then that's a good bargain. No, with just this alone, I still cannot afford to be negligent.

"So is this all you have to say? In your initial invitation, you said there was a person you wanted me to meet though. But I don't think a person worth that is amongst the 1st years though".

"That's right. There may be no one like that amongst the 1st years".

"What?".

"It's about time".

Just as the appointed time was imminent, as though he had timed it, that man showed himself from afar.

Seeing that figure, Ryuen could not hide his surprise at the unexpected visitor. As that man walked his way towards us, he stopped exactly between me and Ryuen.

".....of all people, him? The one you said you wanted me to meet?".

I directed my gaze towards that man without denying the question from Ryuen.

"I'm sorry it had to be this early in the morning".

"I don't mind. This is a good time for a clandestine meeting. Your location of choice isn't bad either".

It's because it's a limited school campus, and it's inside its resource. It's a position where I would be able to immediately spot anyone coming from both the left and right.

If by any chance, someone were to come here, this man would probably pretend to be a stranger and simply walk off.

"You seem pretty close to the former student council president. Was Suzune also useful?".

Including the rooftop incident from a while ago too, Ryuen lightly laughed. Perhaps he had already conjectured that she is the little sister of the student council president, but it seems he's already investigated it.

"I had thought you'd be alone, Ayanokouji. To think Ryuen would be accompanying you".

Rather than surprised, it was more like he was confirming it with me just in case.

Glancing once at the snow piled up on my head, then not paying it any attention, the older Horikita began to talk.

"Then, I'll be continuing with what I have to say under the assumption that Ryuen Kakeru is also a cooperator. If we go about it leisurely, there's no telling who will spot us after all".

"Wait a minute. Who are you calling a cooperator?".

"At the very least I can guarantee that he's not an external enemy".

Ally, cooperator. I couldn't answer with a lie like that so I answered this way.

"Ayanokouji, when you requested help from me a while back, do you remember the promise you made to me?".

"Yeah. It's about helping you stop Nagumo Miyabi, right?".

"Nagumo? You mean the new student council president?".

The reason I'm with Ryuen right now is because I had wanted him to know about what the older Horikita is thinking as well. Of course, I could have told him about it separately, but having the older Horikita here lay it out for him directly would have a stronger persuasive effect.

"It seems he doesn't like the way Nagumo is doing things".

"I see. So you're contriving to use Ayanokouji to stop Nagumo, huh? It's a famous gossip that the 2nd years are all dominated by that man after all. To deal with him, there's no other option but to use the 1st years. Tell me something, Horikita. Since when did you start eyeing Ayanokouji?".

Towards the older Horikita, Ryuen calls him directly by his name. Not only

that, but his attitude was one of condescension. Well, since I'm doing something similar too it's not my place to say.

"Right after he enrolled. On the other hand, it seems you've had quite the hard time finding him".

It probably wasn't in retaliation, but in response to Ryuen, the older Horikita simply answered indifferently like that.

"Kuku. It's because I'm the type who takes his time enjoying the process".

"For all that, you sure got beaten considerably well".

In response to Ryuen, who was taking such a high pressure attitude, he replied as though he were roasting him. It seems Ryuen also sensed that, but he toughened his gaze.

"If you think my skills are lacking then, would you care to test them out right here?".

'Even though I'm injured, I can still take you down', Ryuen provoked him in that spirit.

"I'll have to decline. I have no interest in such things".

The older Horikita responds calmly.

"Kuku. I knew you wouldn't take me up on it".

As Ryuen laughs lightly, he plants his crossed feet on the ground. Right after that, using a frontal kick, he sends snow flying towards the older Horikita's face. The point of it was to blind the opponent.

Looking for the moment where he becomes agitated after his vision is lost from the snow, Ryuen launches his right fist forward aiming for the older Horikita's abdomen.

Towards that, without even giving off the feeling that his vision is obstructed, the older Horikita predicts the attack and completely guards against it. Even as he falls back, without panicking, calmly, he used his middle finger to adjust his glasses by the bridge.

"I thought you were just an intelligent bastard who only has his craftiness, but

you're quite good aren't you?".

Regardless of it having been a surprise attack, towards the older Horikita who blocked it, Ryuuen gave his compliments.

"I believe I told you I'll decline".

"What's the matter? If you dislike it you're free to attack me anytime. Or could it be, you can't fight back against a 1st year?".

"It seems like you've gotten yourself quite a reliable friend, Ayanokouji".

Pan! And with a sound like that, the older Horikita brushes off the snow and dirt on his clothes.

"I was also just thinking that".

But Ryuuen's gaze that would snap at just about anyone did not change.

"Well, that's fine. I'll evaluate you as a man who can get things done to an extent. Horikita-'senpai'".

It's not like it couldn't be taken as sarcasm, but Ryuuen added an honorific.

"Likewise. You're not fit for the student council but I am giving you a certain amount of valuation".

"I'm very happy to be praised by the former student council president".

Not receiving it sincerely, Ryuuen raised his hand and answered as though turning it aside. Since such an interaction between those two has ended, the older Horikita got down to business.

"Now what I want Ayanokouji to do is to protect and maintain order in this school. You can use any means necessary for that. You can remove the student council president Nagumo Miyabi from his throne, or get him exposed in committing a careless action, or just obstruct him, you can choose whatever method is easier to carry out. Once the 3rd semester begins, Nagumo's real power will strengthen and he'll begin to take action in earnest".

"In detail, how is it going to change? Are you saying the student council has such influence?".

"Of course, the student council is not omnipotent. However, unlike other

schools where the student council is just for decoration, it is also a fact that a certain amount of influence is given to this student council. At present, whenever problems occur at school, the student council takes center stage and resolves it. Both Ayanokouji and Ryuen should be aware of that".

During Sudou's assault case too, the ones who presided over the case weren't the faculty but rather the student council headed by the older Horikita.

"And also, the student council has the authority to think about and decide on parts of the special exams too. This year, a survival exam took place on an uninhabited island for the 1st years, but that was something the previous student council thought up being made reality".

In other words, in the special exams, Nagumo can create something entirely different from what we've encountered until now, such a possibility exists, huh?

"He's trying to make the shitty, boring school life you guys have constructed into an interesting one, right? You should welcome it".

Laughing, Ryuen once again crossed his legs.

"If it's the right way, that is. However, up until now, Nagumo has used methods that have led many students to expulsion. As a matter of fact, amongst the 2nd years up until today, there have been 17 students who have gotten expelled.

According to the pre-expulsion interviews, even though you may already know it, more than half of them had Nagumo involved".

17 students. I understand that this is by no means a small amount.

"If he gets that many people expelled, I don't imagine it'll be hard for him to rule over an entire school year".

There was probably a force that had attempted to stop Nagumo. However, if the tables were turned on them, depending on the situation, that force may be weakened, absorbed and then capitulate.

And then, Nagumo probably succeeded in gaining control over all the 2nd years.

"Now that he's assumed office as student council president, that will extend

to the 1st years and 3rd years too. Once next year rolls around, even towards the new 1st years, that influence will become more pronounced is what I predict".

If we leave him alone, it may not simply end with just 10 or 20 people being expelled.

"Isn't Nagumo just being rational? Those 17 students were just worthless people and that's why they got crushed, right?".

"The ones who break the rules will be expelled. That is natural. However, guiding everyone to graduation without losing a single person. Isn't that what an ideal leader is all about?".

"So is Horikita-senpai-sama trying to tell us he hasn't expelled anyone?".

"I was only talking about the ideal. At the very least, at this current stage, no one from amongst the 1st years have been expelled. To pursue that ideal is not a bad thing, right?".

"So he says, Ayanokouji. What do you think about that? About the ideal this man speaks of".

"I can understand it as far as it being an ideal is concerned. It's also fine even if there are people who aspire to it. However, at the very least I can say Ryuen and I are not the types to pursue such an ideal".

"Kukuku. That's exactly right".

If there's someone who meets that criteria right now, it would have to be none other than Ichinose Honami of Class B.

"Of course, I have no intention of desiring that much from you. If you can stop Nagumo's rampage, that's good enough".

He said it simply but if such a thing could be easily done, the older Horikita wouldn't have requested this. If the student council also has their own fair share of power, then all the more, it's not something that can be stopped.

It's because if I act so as to not carelessly cause expulsions, then all I would be able to achieve through my efforts would be to make sure the 1st years don't suffer penalties as well as know the contents of the special exams.

"I'll be taking my leave here. I've been made into a secret sharer too after all".

Apparently, Ryuen has no interest in the happenings of the student council, it seems.

"But it was quite a fascinating talk, but anymore than this is a waste of time. Later".

Perhaps it was a negotiation that was to his satisfaction, but without any hesitation at all, Ryuen headed back towards the dorm.

I called out towards Ryuen's back.

"From now on, are you planning on remaining all alone?".

"Leave me be. From the start, this is my nature, it fits me".

Leaving behind those words, Ryuen left along with the footprints in the snow.

"Ayanokouji, the reason you let Ryuen hear all this, is to turn him into an ally?".

"That's not entirely wrong but.....if I had to say, the goal was more so I could remove myself from being a target of his interest".

I was aiming to appeal to Ryuen that I definitely would not be participating in the conflict between the 1st year classes. If he is made to believe that from now on, I'll be busy planning countermeasures against the student council, the possibility of him bearing fangs against me again would decrease.

Someone warlike such as Sakayanagi who would willingly become an enemy for him should be more entertaining for Ryuen as well. Of course, it does seem like he himself no longer has any desire to fight seriously against anyone anymore though.

"In any case, from now on an understanding friend will also become necessary to you too. In that sense, someone who's gone for a bout with you like Ryuen may be a good fit".

"Friend, huh?".

Well, more importantly than that, right now I should accumulate as much

information as I possibly can. Making contact with the older Horikita is, in the same vein as making contact with Ryuen, not something I'd like to frequently engage in.

I'd like to make the most of each and every one of these opportunities.

"I barely have any information on the senior students. Can I rely on you to offer me that?"

"Of course. I've already completed the preparations for that".

Saying that, the older Horikita took out his phone. When I gave him my number, a message immediately arrived. As I scanned through the message, I received an explanation from the older Horikita.

"From amongst the members of the student council, I'll tell you the ones you should keep an eye on other than Nagumo himself. One of them is the newly appointed Vice President from Class B of the 2nd years, a man named Kiriya. Then the Secretary Mizowaki. And then one other, Secretary Tonokawa. Both of these secretaries were former students of Class B who went through thick and thin together with Nagumo and some of the few people capable of offering Nagumo suggestions. Then now, the remaining members".

In the form of a formal resume, something with photographic portraits attached to it was delivered to me. A glimpse alone was enough to make me understand who belonged to which class. Starting with the Vice President, judging from the number of students currently registered in the student council without belonging to Class A, I can infer just how much power Nagumo wields.

In any case, this information is valuable. It's not an easy task to make contact with students of a different school year. Especially the ones in the student council president's circle, I cannot afford to carelessly take action.

It should have taken a considerable amount of time normally just to gather the information I've acquired right now.

"The only ones who would know about Nagumo's actions and his character in detail are in all likelihood, students from the same school year as him. Even though we're connected through the student council, it's not like I know everything about Nagumo either".

Normally, in order to destroy Nagumo, further information would be vitally required. What kind of character he possesses, what kind of strategy he prefers. It's necessary to grasp such things.

"And since those vital 2nd years are also under Nagumo's thumb, that also seems difficult".

"Exactly.....however, there are students amongst the 2nd years who even now, oppose Nagumo".

He said it as though he had an idea who they were.

"Their name is?".

"Unfortunately, I cannot tell you yet at this stage. It's because I cannot guarantee the safety of that student if their connection to me were to be discovered by Nagumo".

"They'll be branded a traitor and eliminated.....there's a possibility of them getting expelled, is what you're saying?".

"I may be able to protect them while I'm still enrolled, but once I graduate, that protection is gone".

The thing I should be wary of is why the older Horikita is telling me this.

"You intend on doing something to bring me and that 2nd year student into contact, aren't you?".

"If you're up for it, I'd like to name you as a student from amongst the 1st years capable of taking action".

Is what he probably wants to say. As long as they won't reveal their identity, I will have no choice but to provide my name. Even though they're in opposition to Nagumo, they're still 2nd year. Taking next year into consideration, I'd like to avoid carelessly standing out.

"What action to take is up to you".

Normally, declining here would be a good idea.

But, this is dependent on the condition that no one realizes my specs. Or, on the condition that said student won't disclose them. However, as of the current

moment, the truth about me has already been leaked to Sakayanagi and the members who were together with Ryuen. In particular, Sakayanagi is a student who knows about my White Room background as well.

The more I attempt to keep it a secret, the more potent a weapon it becomes for Sakayanagi. But there's not much profit to be had in rejecting his proposal here.

"Understood. I don't mind if you tell that 2nd year about me".

"It's a bold choice you've made, but the right one".

"Now all that's left is to see whether your words have any weight to them or not".

There is a reliable student, even if he says that, from the perspective of the other side I'm just a 1st year. Is it ok to rely on someone younger than me? They should be feeling anxious.

"If you won't believe my statements, then defeating Nagumo cannot possibly be done".

"Well, I'll leave it to you".

"Ever since I met you, you've possessed an unbelievable amount of humility".

"Because I'm in your debt, after all".

Of course, this is only the case if I'm obediently obeying the older Horikita and taking action.

As someone who aspires to a peaceful daily life, getting involved with the student council is obviously something I'd like to avoid. Even though I only have to endure this until the older Horikita graduates, there are still things I'm wary of. Does he believe after his graduation, I will protect our promise with integrity and help out in defeating Nagumo?

Such a thing surely isn't the case.

"Do you know what I'm thinking?".

"What happens after I graduate, something like that?"

Well done.

"I didn't expect you to broach the topic yourself. Did you think it more problematic to keep quiet about it?"

"It's because I couldn't see through you and it felt eerie".

"Ultimately, I don't mind even if your cooperation only lasts until my graduation. If by then, the minds of the enrolled students have not changed, then it just means that's it for this school, that's how it is".

"The problem might come before that, you know? What if I cannot stand up to Nagumo?"

"I wouldn't charge someone I believe to be incapable of doing so with something so important".

Does it mean the older Horikita has appraised me as someone capable of stopping Nagumo? Or is he just praising me since even those of low ability can outdo themselves when flattered? Either way, I can't see through this person.

"I'll try thinking up a strategy but I cannot guarantee that I'll be able to produce results before your graduation".

"I understand that".

Why is this man relying this much on an unknown existence like me? If he wishes to preserve the traditions of Koudou Ikusei Senior High School, then he should have entrusted this to a more passionate individual.

Even as a former student council president who hold pride in his school, this is far too abnormal. In the first place, even after becoming aware of an abnormality like Nagumo, the older Horikita only watched. He did say that it was after I had made myself known but even that makes me slightly uneasy.

"I'm not expecting you to move exactly as I had hoped just from a single debt alone. From the start, you too should have accepted the anti-Nagumo matter with that intention. Am I wrong?"

It seems the older Horikita also properly understands that fact.

"Even though you're the former student council president, you still have a certain degree of authority.....no, influence after all. I had assessed that you would be useful if I had turned you into an ally. Isn't that natural?"

The older Horikita won't abandon his impartial standing and favor me directly. However, there are many cases where cooperation has been acquired through reliance on every important point as long as there is a connection behind the scenes. As long as I'm enrolled in this school, at the very least I'll be facing a variety of risks. At such a time, having built common interests and partner relationships can be useful.

"You're free to rely on me if you wish, but it'll be problematic if you expect too much of me".

"I have no intention of doing so. At the very most, it'll be fine if you helped me out with 'one last try'".

Of course, it would be best if that 'one last try' were to not be necessary.

In any case, the important thing is whether we can own that 'one last try' or not.

"Fine. Because defeating Nagumo probably won't be an easy thing to do after all".

To play along with that troublesome business until the older Horikita graduates and obtaining a trump card for emergencies on the other hand.

"By the way, as for the strategy against Nagumo, I'll be slowly developing it from now. But before that there's something I'd like to confirm. It's about your little sister".

"Whether you use Suzune or not, you're free to decide".

"Not that. I've been in the same class as Horikita for close to a year now, but I think she possesses a certain amount of aptitude. Even though you've had your sister beside you for a long time, haven't you noticed?".

"Aptitude, huh? What does she have that gives her aptitude? Her success in academics? Or the presence of her athletic abilities?".

It seems he's already noticed the parts I've been paying attention to.

"I mean in terms of coordination ability. Horikita does have clumsy aspects to her but overall, her ability is high".

"My sister is incompetent. Always chasing after my shadow, she's made it her

goal to catch up to that".

How shallow, he spits that out. However, that phrasing just now was.....

"Could it be.....that being the 'terminal station' for her is the problem?".

"You're free to interpret it however you want. It's not like anything will change just from this alone, right?".

"That may be so".

But with this, I feel like I now understand the reason why the older Horikita acts so harshly towards his sister.

"If your sister were to join the student council, will you give her a 'one last push'?".

"I'll cooperate to what extent I can".

Just by hearing that alone, even though only slightly, clues towards beating Nagumo start to appear.

"I've received the data. I've also managed to grasp the situation, all that's left is for you to take your time and wait".

"I will be doing that. Because it can be said that the future livelihood of the school is depending on you, after all".

Putting an excessive amount of pressure on me like that, the older Horikita left.

1

After my conversation with Ryuen and the older Horikita, I shifted my schedule and headed back to the dorm. Until the afternoon I leisurely spent time alone in my room, killing time by surfing the net and reading books. And then the next action I took, was to send a message to Horikita.

Having her be nominated for it by the older Horikita and having received his assurance, it's now possible for me to sound her out for the student council. For someone like Horikita, who is basically a loner, she may also be cooped up inside her room much like me.

Somehow, she seems like she'd be weak towards the cold. If so, that would

make this easier.

"There's something I'd like to talk about".

Such a message I sent to her was marked as 'read' within a few minutes.

"I don't mind. But would a call suffice? Or do you want to meet in person?".

"In person, I guess. If possible, how about now?".

"I'm at a cafe right now. If you can come here, then I'll hear you out".

Contrary to the image I had, it seems Horikita is currently in the middle of an outing.

I felt slightly troubled by it, but it's better to get troublesome things over with as quickly as possible.

"I'll head over there immediately".

I replied with just that and covered myself with my coat. When I went down to the dorm's lobby, Ike and Yamauchi, and also Sudou, had gathered there. Having come down via elevator and seemingly on their way out, they didn't notice me behind them. As I began walking in the same direction as those three without calling out to them, I overheard their conversation.

"What's up with that, Ken? In the end, Horikita rejected a Christmas date with you".

"Shut up, Haruki. Leave it be".

"In the end, we're going to close off this year without having had any girlfriends, huh. I feel so empty".

"Tch. I'm going to take it nice and slow. It's not like Suzune already has a boyfriend. It's just, how should I put it, she hasn't shown any interest in things like romance yet. From now on, I'll act without rushing it".

Apparently, Sudou has been making a move on Horikita.

However he seems to have brilliantly suffered an honorable defeat.

But far from giving up, he seems to have decided to continue steadily onwards.

"You're an earnest one. Hey, Kanji, do you want to stay the night at the karaoke today? Let's earnestly, enthusiastically sing lonely Christmas songs".

"Ehh, what are you on about?".

"What do you mean what I'm on about? I'm saying we should stay the night at the karaoke today".

"No, sorry Haruki. I can't do that".

"Huh? What do you mean you can't? There's nothing for you to do on Christmas Eve right? Your only lover is your right hand".

".....even I have a variety of things to do".

Ike was obviously agitated, but he did not say the reason why he could not go to the karaoke.

"Oi, could it be, Kanji.....!".

Sudou, who also seemed to have realized the bizarreness of his attitude, closed in on him.

"N-No, it's not like that".

Even though they had not asked him anything in particular, Ike said that in denial and then told them the reason.

"I'm just going out to have dinner with a friend, that's all.....".

Saying that, Ike averted his gaze and the volume of his voice dropped. The fact that this 'friend' was not a male was something even I, listening from behind them, understood.

And then, a scene from yesterday came to mind.

"Who is it!? Who are you going out with!? Spit it out! Spit it out!".

Having lost his calm, Yamauchi grabbed Ike's collar as he shouted that out.

"I-It's really not that big of a deal.....it's S-Shinohara".

"Shinohara.....you mean, from our class, THAT Shinohara!?".

Having confessed that, Ike nods slightly.

"But why Shinohara? I mean, the two of you are constantly quarreling".

Yamauchi also likely agrees with Sudou's simple question. An unusual combination.

"Like I said, it's only for dinner. There's no way I'd be satisfied with a woman like that, right? She ran into some trouble a while back, and when I saved her, she said she wanted to thank me!".

"No, no, no. I don't know about thanking you or not but it's the Christmas Eve, you know, the Eve!?".

"It's nothing really, I'm serious. Going out with someone like that, even if a cataclysm were to happen, there's still no way I'd do that!".

"I don't believe you! Let's tail them, Ken. Tail them, tail them!".

"You guys, seriously cut it out. It'll be a bother for me if rumors about me and that ugly Shinohara were to spread!".

Ike answered like that, but he didn't seem all that unhappy. Ike and Shinohara, huh? They might unexpectedly be a well-matched couple. Of course, the probability of that happening is, at this point, still an unknown number.

2

Winter vacation, students crowded Keyaki Mall as though it were a part of their daily lives. My destination was also congested. Since more than 80% of its customers were females, I could not find Horikita right away. As I wandered around inside the shop, I finally spotted her from behind.

"I'm here".

"That was fast".

Right after having had that exchange with Horikita, someone beside her called out to me too.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun".

I've really encountered a truly unexpected pair. Has this ever happened before? For Horikita to be alone together with Kushida. I can't help but think there's a third party present. I used my gaze to scan the surroundings.

"There's no one else here".

As though responding to that, Horikita indifferently answers me. I had thought it was possible that Hirata might have been involved too, but that's not the case either.

"I don't mean to stick my nose into this but.....which one of you invited the other?"

In response to that question of mine, Kushida gently smiled.

"Me. I invited Kushida-san out".

That question was resolved with an answer that I did not think would be the case. No, I suppose this isn't that unnatural. On the contrary, recently, Horikita has been proactively attempting to resolve the problem of her conflict with Kushida. In all likelihood, this gathering too, can be attributed to that. If it were only Horikita here, Kushida would not speak reservedly but in a public location like this, she would have no choice but to wear her mask. Horikita did a good job drawing her out here.

"By the way, Horikita-san, how's it going with Sudou-kun recently?"

"How? What do you mean by that?"

"Aren't you going to spend Christmas together with him---is what I was thinking?"

"There's no way I would do something like that".

She flatly replied like that.

"Really? Didn't Sudou-kun ask you out?"

"Isn't that something irrelevant right now?"

Kushida had attempted to use my interjection to change the flow of the conversation here but that was prevented by Horikita.

Horikita, who by nature, already possessed a bullish attitude, is using two points: her predominance from having won during the test and the fact that it's a public cafe to lay siege to the impregnable fortress that is Kushida.

"And also, Ayanokouji-kun. How much longer do you intend to stand around? If you have something to say, would you mind getting on with it?"

'Right now I'm busy talking to Kushida', is what she seems like she wants to say.

As a matter of fact, looking at it from Horikita's perspective, this is a valuable occasion.

"Sorry. I didn't expect someone else to be present too. I'll leave it for next time".

I decided to leave since I was clearly unneeded here. However, because it was a moment like this that, on the contrary, Kushida judged that my presence was welcome.

"Isn't it fine, Horikita-san? If it's all the same, let's have Ayanokouji-kun join us for tea?".

She said that and stopped me from leaving. However, receiving the pressure of Horikita's silence, I didn't have the guts to calmly sit down.

"Maybe next time".

I said that and hurriedly tried to break away.

"Wait. I'll hear you out here".

"No, it'll be a completely unrelated matter".

Since I disliked the idea of Kushida overhearing unnecessary things, I tried to escape like that. Recently, I've been telling various people about the circumstances at hand but as far as this case is concerned, there are absolutely no benefits in letting her know. Not even that, there's nothing but a mass of disadvantages in this case.

"Could it be, that it's something you don't want her to overhear?".

I got pointed out like that by the sharp Horikita.

"Is that true, Ayanokouji-kun?".

Kushida looks at me with sad eyes. Of course, I had every intention of denying it immediately.

However, Horikita came around again as if to seal that off.

"I'm sorry but she's also a member of our class. Keeping secrets like that is

unnecessary".

"That's not it. This has nothing to do with the class. At best, this is between me and Horikita as individuals".

"I see. Then I don't mind. This has something to do with me, right? Say it here".

"I'll have to decline".

"Then, what you have to say right now, I'll never hear you out elsewhere".

Apparently, Horikita's resolve has been firmed. Perhaps she thinks speaking with me without hiding anything is the first step towards improving her relationship with Kushida.

As always, Kushida's expression was overflowing with kindness.

No matter how many times one gets lured into a swamp and no matter how many times one comes close to dying from it, just by seeing that smile of hers, 'maybe this time' is something they'd end up thinking.

I may be able to convince them here by fabricating an appropriate story. But, I doubt Horikita, who is on guard now, will be accepting the proposal I am about to tell her in the future either.

"Understood. Then I'll be speaking frankly. Is that fine?".

"Yes. Tell me".

"Do you have any intention of joining the student council?".

No use crying over spilt milk. I don't know how Horikita will take this. I stated my business as it is.

".....I'm sorry, but I'm not keeping up".

She tilted her head as if to ask why I'm saying this to her.

"Isn't the context deeply lacking? Why did you say that?".

"I wanted to talk more about that as well".

"Very well, continue".

"Umm, is it fine, Horikita-san?".

The one who interrupted me was Kushida.

"Fine? What do you mean by that?"

"It's about the student council, so I think Horikita-san's brother might also be involved in this matter. Is it ok even if I end up hearing this?"

"Ever since middle school, you've known about my brother. What are you saying now after all this time?"

The reason Horikita used her brother as a witness, too, is related to the fact that Kushida is aware of their relationship as siblings. As long as it's not something to hide she'll be using it effectively, is what she means, huh?

This isn't something that'll be over quickly. I firmed my resolve and took a seat beside the two of them.

"A certain person desires your induction into the student council".

"A certain person?"

".....your brother".

Of course, strictly speaking, the older Horikita requested no such thing. He only told me I was free to choose whether to use Horikita, or to not use her. However, to make Horikita take action, I have no other choice but to use her brother.

"Why is my brother telling me to join the student council? That sounds absurd".

Looking slightly dissatisfied, Horikita repudiates it.

"It's the truth".

"If it really were the truth, then my brother should have told me this directly. Why did he go through you?"

"Do you think that brother is the type to tell you directly?"

"I don't. In the first place, he's not one to say things like join the student council".

In other words, Horikita did not believe my words from the very beginning.

If it's a sibling relationship that has frozen up to this extent, it would only be interpreted as a lie. However, even so, Kushida's existence is unnecessary if I'm to deal fully with the truth.

Once the 3rd semester begins, she'll learn of Ryuen's downfall and she may become convinced that I'm the one behind the secret maneuvers. If that happens, it'll get even more troublesome. Leaving aside that this would have inevitably happened, such a time does not necessarily have to be now.

"I have no intention of playing along with your lies. What exactly is your point?"

"It's the truth. If you think I'm lying to you, why don't you directly confirm it for yourself?"

I changed the subject from a lie I cut in with to the truth.

"You're acting rather bullishly.....".

"Bullish or not, you're doubting me right? Then you can just contact him".

"Then you, umm, you know my brother's contact number?"

"I don't know but since you're his sister, isn't it obvious for you to know?"

"I don't know".

"If you don't mind, shall we try contacting Tachibana-senpai?"

"Tachibana, she's the one who acts as my brother's secretary?"

"Yep. I've talked with Tachibana-senpai many times before, I know her contact number".

As expected of Kushida, it seems she's been making friends even in unexpected places.

"It's ok even if I really confirm it, right, Ayanokouji-kun? If it turns out to be a lie, the consequences will be heavy".

"Please do as you wish".

Either way, if the older Horikita realizes my strategy, he'll match it accordingly. Everything Horikita tries to confirm will be rewritten into truth.

"Thank you, senpai. Yes, please excuse me".

Having finished calling, Kushida began to operate her phone. Soon afterwards, Horikita's phone briefly rings. Apparently she's successfully acquired the older Horikita's contact number, and has forwarded it to Horikita.

"Thank you, Kushida-san".

"No, you're welcome".

Even though there were people around, having to show such a friendly response to Horikita must have been hard for her.

It's impressive that she didn't let any of it show. Horikita drops her gaze down to her phone's screen. And I had thought she would call immediately, but her hands did not move and she kept on gripping her phone in both hands.

".....fuu".

A deep sigh, no, a deep breath.

To be this nervous from just calling your family is not normal.

"If everything turns out to be a lie.....you should prepare yourself".

"No need for caution".

This is Horikita's gamble.

There's no way her brother could possibly be telling her to join the student council. Yet the fact that I'm brimming with confidence concerns her. Even as she thinks this may just be a bluff, she also thinks it may be the truth. If she could somehow confirm the truth without having to directly contact her brother, that would be ideal for her, but that's an impossible task. Horikita, who could not bring herself to trust me, firmed her resolve and pressed the call button. For a few seconds she pressed the phone to her ear.

Perhaps the person on the other end of the line answered, but the fact that Horikita had become even more nervous was conveyed.

"Ahh, umm, i-it's me. It's Horikita Suzune".

Horikita speaks in a formal manner.

"I asked Tachibana-senpai for your contact number, umm, and I called you,

nii-san".

Then, showing us a flustered look that one cannot usually see on Horikita (even though she herself probably doesn't wish to let us see), she asked the necessary question.

Then, she was probably told that the induction into the student council matter I was talking to her about earlier was true.

"Yes, t-thank you very much. Please excuse me".

A pause after ending the call, then she intensely glared at me.

"It was the truth, wasn't it? Why do I have to be glared at?".

"Why are you acting the role of the bridge? It's because that's baffling to me".

It's a truly easy-to-understand matter. Certainly, no matter who looks at it, it's unnatural.

"Horikita-san, are you going to be joining the student council?".

".....no. I won't be joining".

"Hold up. Your brother told you to join, didn't he?".

"To join would be for my sake, is what he told me. But.....I doubt joining the student council will be for my own sake".

Even if it happened to be the wish of an absolute existence like her brother, Horikita seems to have no intention of going along with it. Even if I persist any further here, there's nothing to be gained.

I'd like to stop giving Kushida unnecessary information at this point.

"I got it. For the time being, please give me another chance to talk to you again next time".

"I wonder. I think it'll just be a waste of time though?".

"Probably".

It seems Horikita has also realized that I've made a move to end this, as she didn't do anything to stop me. What's important right now is to connect to her again. As long as Kushida is here, I cannot continue speaking any further.

"See you later, Ayanokouji-kun".

From Kushida who gently called out to me like that, I felt something unusual.

3

It's 10 o'clock at night. Christmas Eve passes by moment by moment. I was watching the television alone without hanging out with my male friends. It was showing a live broadcast of the Tokyo cityscape, depicting its Christmas mood. Even if I tried switching channels as a test, as expected, all of the programmes are related to Christmas. The ranking of presents to gift to girls (although I feel like it's late timing wise) as well as the ranking of presents that would make children happy (as expected I feel like the timing is late). However, there were no programmes in particular I felt were interesting.

I stopped watching the television and turned on my computer. Feeling like I wanted to watch something other than information about Christmas, I looked through the various articles that popped up. Accidents and incidents. Good news about foreign athletes and the such. Even though it's Christmas, one day is just one day after all and the flow of time, without much change, moved on.

The bell to the room rang. It was not from the lobby but from the front door.

"Coming".

As I headed towards the entrance while answering with that, the identity of the visitor was confirmed.

"G-G-G-Good evening".

It was the voice of a classmate I was familiar with. I unlocked the entrance and opened the door.

"Kiyotaka-kun!".

"What's wrong, Airi? It's late at night".

The time was already past 10 o'clock at night but judging from her appearance, it seems like she's just returned.

"Have you been out playing until now? But if I recall, the gathering was tomorrow, right?".

"Yeah. It's different from that. I've been playing together with Haruka-chan ever since afternoon".

"I see".

If they met up from around midday, then it's roughly been half a day.

"Did you have fun?".

"It was a bit exhausting, but I had fun".

"That's a relief".

I no longer have to worry about Airi each and every time. At the very least, within our group, this state will continue. They'll probably happily spend time together tomorrow as well.

"I heard from Haruka-chan that you have business tomorrow and won't be able to come.....".

I see. That reminds me, I had such a talk with Haruka. Her telling me she'll handle it well, might involve her playing with Airi today.

"I have an appointment. Sorry for not being able to join in".

"No, that's perfectly fine. Umm, the truth is, I was planning on handing it over tomorrow but!".

Saying that, Airi extended both her hands towards me. A package wrapped in a simple yet cute, red ribbon was handed over to me.

"This.....if you'll have it".

Apparently she's prepared a Christmas present for me.

"Is it fine? For me to have it?".

"Yeah! I-I've prepared one for everyone else too".

If that's the case, it's easy for me to accept it too. I'll gratefully accept. I took the offered present into my hands. At a time like this, I wonder what the right thing to do is. Should I check the contents right away here? Or should I do so after Airi has left? As I pondered over it, unsure of what to do, Airi shyly said this.

"I-I don't mind if you open it, you know?".

So it seems, and so I decided to unreservedly obey her. As I opened up the small box, what came out from inside were warm-looking gloves.

"Kiyotaka-kun, ever since a while ago, you looked like you wanted gloves.....you don't have one yet, right?".

"I was thinking of buying them, but I didn't in the end. Thank you, Airi".

"Hehehe.....I'm glad".

I had been dragging out my purchase of the gloves. They were simple, blue gloves. It's a lot easier to use them than ones with illustrations and designs carelessly added to them.

I tried putting them on right away. It was the first time wearing gloves in my life, but I didn't announce that fact. It fit into my left hand, and my right hand as well. And then I tried repeating rock–paper–scissors over and over. Airi happily watched me do that.

"H-How is it?".

"The size is perfect, and it's warm".

"I'm glad".

I've never discussed my tastes before but even if I were to go and buy one myself, this glove seems like the one I'd choose.

"Well then, umm, I'm sorry for dropping by late at night. Good night, Kiyotaka-kun".

Perhaps she thought staying too long would be bad, but Airi said that and turned her back. As for me, I wouldn't have minded getting her a cup of tea but it is late at night. On top of that, on Christmas Eve the 24th, it would be all kinds of trouble for me to invite a girl into my room. As I saw off Airi, who was walking towards the elevator, whether it was because she realized my stare or not, she looked back once. And after waving her hand slightly at me, she went into the elevator and returned back to the upper floor.

After seeing her off, I returned to my room.

".....I wonder when I should offer my gratitude".

Payback for Valentine's Day is on White Day, something like that is naturally, known to me but I wonder when payback for Christmas would be. I'll look it up later.

Chapter 4: The Stormy Double Date

Part 1

Christmas, the morning of the 25th had come. Up until now, this one day held no particular meaning, but that is not the case today. In my entire life for the first time, I'll be spending this Christmas with the opposite sex. I wonder what kind of day it seems for Satou. We don't know much about each other. In that sense, it would be great if this turns out to be a good day.

".....somehow, this is a mysterious feeling".

Up until now, I have never participated in an act that could be described as a 1-on-1 date. That's why you could say I'm not feeling down to earth, or rather, there are parts that I don't understand.

Precisely because I am such a person that it could be said that today's date carries a significant meaning. However, whether it is a success or a failure, is something that is currently uncertain.

"Whatever happens, happens, huh".

In any case even if I think about it, there's no answer forthcoming. I left my room and descended down via elevator to the dorm's lobby. If I recall, we were going to watch a movie that starts screening from today huh.....

Unfortunately the weather today is cloudy and it seems thick clouds will cover the sky for the whole day. The promised time is 11:30. But let's act to arrive there slightly early.

Part 2

Having arrived at the meeting spot, I checked the time. It will be the promised time in about 10 minutes. Raising my head while thinking that, I saw Satou who was heading towards me. Perhaps she was looking for me but she was looking around at her surroundings, seemingly uneasy. Soon enough, our eyes met, and Satou narrowed her eyes happily.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun!".

Saying that, she trotted over and closed the distance between us. As she came to a stop, along with that, a scent which moderately tickled my nose came.

"You're early".

"You too, Ayanokouji-kun.....could it be, did I keep you waiting for long?".

"I just arrived a while ago".

It was a cliché line but since it was indeed the truth, I told her as it is.

"Really?".

I was overpowered by Satou who closed in on me with a predatory feeling. There are still a few minutes left to go until the scheduled time, but there should be no problem with making a move early. I had thought we would get a move on immediately but for some reason, Satou once again started looking around at her surroundings. Since she showed no signs of moving, I called out to her.

"Not going?".

"T-That's right, wait a minute".

Putting her hand inside the bag she was carrying, she began searching for something.

"Could it be I forgot.....".

In a volume that was loud enough for me to hear, she whispered that.

"Did you forget something?".

"Ahh, no. I was just wondering what happened to my phone".

As I looked down towards her swaying feet, I could see a long and narrow box covered in wrapping paper sticking out, but since I felt like it would be in bad taste to stare, I averted my gaze.

"I don't mind calling your phone for you".

"Yeah, thanks. You're really kind, Ayanokouji-kun".

Merely helping someone look for their phone, not to mention calling it for them, isn't something that can really be considered kind.

Undoubtedly anyone would have offered a similar form of cooperation.

"If I recall, in the morning".

As Satou said something awkward like that.

"Ahh, found it, found it".

From Satou, I heard such good news. As I looked back, Satou laughed while holding her phone in her hands.

"I've kept you waiting, shall we go?".

Satou put her phone into her pocket but then.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun".

Immediately afterwards, from behind me someone called out. As I looked back the one there was Hirata Yousuke. As ever, he was an invigorating young man. Good morning, I raised my hand slightly and replied as such to him.

By the way, beside Hirata was the figure of his lover, Karuizawa Kei. It seems on this day, Christmas, the two of them are also out on a date. I am aware that the relationship between those two is fake but perhaps in order to make their surroundings perceive it as being true, this action is being taken. If so, then the effect of it is instantaneous.

"Good morning, Karuizawa-san".

Calling out to her, Satou runs over to Karuizawa.

"Good morning".

Towards Satou, Karuizawa too, naturally smiles and initiates a conversation.

"This is a rather unusual combination".

Seeing me and Satou together, it couldn't be helped that Hirata would say something like that.

"Are you guys also on a date?".

Even if it's only as a formality, asking that would be good.

"Yeah. I also 'just in case' didn't make any prior plans for Christmas. Fortunately, nobody called me out either".

In anticipation for any and all situations, he seems to have left his plans for the day vacant for the sake of his fake lover Karuizawa. Hirata always places himself second and prioritizes taking action for the sake of those around him always. Even if I thought of emulating that, it's not something that's easily done.

"It seems like someone from your group of friends should have called you out though. No news?"

Not only classmates, it wouldn't be strange even if his seniors from the soccer club called him out.

"I wonder. I think they were just probably being considerate".

Answering like that, Hirata then looked at Karuizawa with a warm gaze. I see. By their surroundings, Hirata and Karuizawa are seen as the ideal couple pair. So in regards with someone like him with a girlfriend, right on the cusp of Christmas, they didn't do anything as uncouth as calling him out. This is proof that Hirata and Karuizawa are properly functioning as a couple. However, as long as their fake relationship remains established, it would be difficult for him to be intimate with another girl.

It's somewhat pitiable that he was unable to flippantly close the distance with the opposite sex. Even if he finds someone he's interested in, since it's Hirata, he's not the type to simply cut off the request from Karuizawa.

It's precisely because he could be trusted like this that Karuizawa too, found it easy to choose Hirata as her parasitic destination.

"From the start, Karuizawa-san's someone who's always been frank with the girls from the class but I never knew you were this close with Satou-san".

Hirata whispers that while looking at the two of them with a familial gaze as though he were looking at a younger sister or a daughter.

"I did have the image of them playing quite a bit together over the vacation. Is that not the case?"

"At the very least, playing together on the holidays, I don't think they were

that close".

"Is that so?".

"Why did you think this was not uncommon?".

"Not really, just had a feeling".

In any case, there's no point in interfering with Hirata and Karuizawa any further than this. I checked the time on my phone. It's already 11:40. The screening time was fast approaching. It's about time I took Satou and headed over to the movie theater. I thought that but Satou and Karuizawa seemed to be chatting away happily. Since they were conversing quietly, I could not hear the contents of their conversation though. Even if I wait around like this, their conversation isn't showing any signs at all of ending. As I was lost on what to do, my eyes met Hirata's.

From just that alone, it seems he understood what I was thinking.

Hirata, who concluded that overstaying here would lead to getting in our way, called out to Karuizawa.

"Isn't it bad to get in their way any further, Karuizawa-san? Let's go, shall we?".

He interrupted the conversation of those two as if to break it up in his usual, gentle tone. As though pulled back to reality, Karuizawa and Satou approached us.

"By the way, since when have the two of you been going out?".

That question suddenly came forth from Karuizawa. No, perhaps even if this were the first thing out of her mouth it wouldn't be strange, it was a natural question to ask.

"Ehh, i-it's not like we're going out or anything! Right? Ayanokouji-kun".

Towards Satou's panicked gaze, I answered by nodding lightly. However, Karuizawa directed a blatantly suspicious gaze towards us.

"Ehh? I mean, you guys are having a date on Christmas, no matter how you look at it you're obviously going out, Hirata-kun thinks so too right?".

"That's right. It's probably not the case if the two of you are denying it but others may think you're going out with each other".

"That's, umm.....I just invited Ayanokouji-kun out to play.....".

Satou then bashfully turned her gaze once again towards me.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun, is it fine? To be spending Christmas playing with me".

"If I didn't want to, I would've declined".

"....hehehe".

Satou scratches herself, looking embarrassed.

"Heh---...you don't seem all that dissatisfied with this. So this means Ayanokouji-kun is interested in Satou-san?".

"S-Stop it, Karuizawa-sa~n".

Satou, while blushing, fanned her face with her hands. But Karuizawa continued on just like that.

"If so, why don't you guys just start dating right now? Then it'll become a date between lovers".

"Karuizawa-san, I really don't think it's our place to be telling them that".

Seeing me in trouble, Hirata gently stops Karuizawa.

"Sorry, sorry. I might have stuck my nose into this a bit too much. Sorry, Satou-san".

"No, I really don't mind".

"Hey Yousuke-kun, I'm curious about these two as well so wouldn't a double date be good?".

For some reason, Karuizawa said something like that.

"Double date?".

Hirata and I shared a glance at the unexpected proposal.

"That's right, me and Hirata-kun. And Satou-san and Ayanokouji-kun will be having a date together. Doesn't it sound interesting? I thought it's not too bad for the four of us to have a date once in a while like this".

If we had set this up beforehand it would be a different matter, but on this day, at this stage, proposing a double date would inevitably leave me bewildered. Even the plan for the day I had set up would be massively changed, if not collapse outright. It's not that simple to keep those together.

From Hirata's expression, too, I could see that he shared my concerns. On the other hand, towards that sudden proposal, Satou did not show any sign of being surprised.

"But won't that be difficult? I think the two of you might have different plans too".

Hirata gently told her of that fact but it didn't seem to have any effect on Karuizawa.

"Satou-san also told me it seemed interesting, right?".

"Yep, it seems interesting".

It seems that the two of them have already had a long, drawn-out talk earlier about the double date. But regardless of which one proposed the idea, this is a slightly aggressive idea.

"How about we save it for next time? I think it would be better to spend the day separately for today. If we're going to be having a double date, it would be better to have one after we've prepared appropriately, that way there should be no problems too".

A natural concern, or more like fear came from Hirata like that.

"That might be true but doesn't the fact that we don't know what might happen also sound interesting?".

Karuizawa already seems to be set on the double date as she replies like that tensely. Unlike the two of us who felt uneasy about the lack of planning of it all, Karuizawa already seems to be finding excitement in the as-of-yet unforeseen developments to come. Perhaps it's because her date with Hirata itself was like routine to her that she's seeking stimulation in this? I think I might have been able to honestly accept it if this had been an incident taking place completely unrelated to me, but I wonder now. If I, who knows everything about

Karuizawa, were to take action alongside her, whether we'd be able to enjoy the uncertain situation awaiting us, is something that remains questionable.

But even so, other than that I still can't think of a reason she would propose a double date.

"For the record, it is Christmas".

Hirata who was looking at me as though he would be a problem, had a troubled look on his face. Looking at him, Karuizawa straight out asks him whether it would be a 'Yes' or a 'No'.

"Hirata-kun's against it?".

"I'm fine with it myself. Isn't it just up to Satou-san and Ayanokouji-kun?".

Not knowing what our opinions on it were, Hirata had no choice but to answer such. Towards Karuizawa who obtained Hirata's permission, Satou directed her gaze towards her as if asking if that was too much trouble. I wonder how Satou, who's the important one here, is taking this matter of the double date.

"It might be a sudden thing but I'd like to try it.....like that".

Really, it was a sudden development. But Satou accepted this situation and voiced her consent.

Perhaps Satou simply could not refuse a proposal from Karuizawa, who stands at the top of the school caste of Class D. Or so I thought, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

"How about it, Ayanokouji-kun?".

From Hirata to Karuizawa, from Karuizawa to Satou and now from Satou to me. The baton had been passed. It cannot carelessly drop it. I need to cautiously accept it.

"That's right.....".

Don't reply immediately, think. I'm already having enough trouble going out to play alone with a girl, a double date is something else. It's not that much but for an inexperienced amateur this is an event with far too much responsibility. However, simply telling them that I'd rather not have a double date so please

stop is a hurdle too high for me.

When everyone in one's surroundings are in perfect synchronization, to raise the sole objection is a most difficult task. If the one in the leading role today, Satou, is able to easily accept it, then neither am I going to object.

I suppose it's also fine to go along with the 'it's interesting because I don't know what's going to happen' thing that Karuizawa spoke of. It's just, there's still a problem even so.

In the first place, we were going to watch a movie from now, so I wonder if a double date all of a sudden will even be possible or not. That was an obvious question. Even if we move to secure seats in a hurry, lining up for it now would be almost impossible. Or it could be that this too, is one of those 'interesting' things.

The impression that we have drifted off-course from the original purpose of the 'date', but looking at it from a different perspective, it cannot be said that a double date is only a bad thing. If I'm alone with Satou and engrossed in conversation, I can predict that there will be moments where an awkward atmosphere would come flowing in. But if Hirata and Karuizawa are there too, they'll be able to properly connect the topics of discussion well.

And besides, Haruka did say she would drag Airi along and have a walk about to make sure we don't run into each other but even so, unexpected incidents may still occur.

On such occasion, rather than seeing me playing together alone with Satou, it would naturally look better if she were to see the four of us acting together. Anyways, if this atmosphere won't let me decline, I should be thinking that way instead.

"If the three of you are fine with that, I have no particular objections".

Not wanting to keep them waiting, as I answered with a 'Yes', Karuizawa immediately took action.

"Then it's decided. Where are the two of you headed from now?".

Easily having confirmed the date, Karuizawa begins forcefully pulling us along as she begins to proceed forward. Towards that, Satou seemed to be somewhat

calm, giving off a relaxed feeling.

Could it be Satou was also nervous, and was anxious about being alone with just the two of us. Let's hope that this event that suddenly popped up will bear fruit.

"Umm you see, Ayanokouji-kun and I were planning on watching a movie from now".

Satou told them the contents of our date while using her phone and having a preparatory meeting with Karuizawa.

"The movie that starts screening today? If so, we're really lucky. We were also planning on going to see it. Uwa, on top of that even the screening time is the same. Amazing, amazing!".

Towards this coincidence, the two of them looked excited.

However Satou's expression seems slightly rigid or rather awkward.

"What a coincidence right, Ayanokouji-kun?".

"Seems to be".

To be seeing the same movie at the same time also seemed to have come as a surprise to Hirata. Even though it is the first day of screening, to brilliantly overlap to this extent truly is lucky.

"Even if we're going to be seeing it together, since it's a movie, what do we do about the seats? We can't change them can we?".

I asked the two of them where their seats were going to be. Let's see whether coincidences continue to pile up or not. Karuizawa checks her phone to confirm.

"How is it, Karuizawa-san?".

Satou peeks at Karuizawa's phone and checked their seating positions.

"Our seats are separate, huh. Well, I guess that can't be helped---".

Karuizawa shows Hirata the seats. Our positions were completely different. It seems coincidences don't run this far, but the position of our seats were completely separate.

"Then, let's go already, Ayanokouji-kun!".

Satou seemed modest and nervous when met up but after having met up with Karuizawa and Hirata, she seems to have returned to her usual attitude as she sticks close to me and begins walking.

".....too close".

I whispered that without thinking in a voice too low for anyone to hear. Having become a double date, the four of us walked towards the movie theater. The four of us, having lined up side-by-side, walked towards the interior of the mall. From the edge it would be me, then Satou, and next to her is Karuizawa, and the one furthest out on the other end is Hirata.

"Heh....you two are looking pretty good aren't you?".

Looking at the two of us walking intimately, Karuizawa whispered that.

"R-Really?".

"No matter how you look at it, you guys look like a couple affectionately spending Christmas together, that sort of feeling?".

"Hehehe. Isn't it embarrassing, Ayanokouji-kun? They're saying we look like a couple".

".....I suppose so".

I suppose I cannot deny that this is a situation which makes it seem to be the case. As long as we're out on a date on Christmas, it can't be helped even if we are more or less told that.

"But still, the two of you seriously aren't going out with each other? Could it be the truth is you're already going out~".

"N-N-No. Not at all. We still aren't in that kind of relationship!".

"Really? If you're hiding something you'd better tell me right now, ok?".

Rather than asking just out of curiosity she's clearly poking fun at us. It's just, I couldn't see any sign of Satou disliking it from the bottom of her heart or being troubled by it. If I had to say, she even seems to be happy about being teased by Karuizawa like that. That seems strange, or rather, it was slightly incomprehensible and I ended up being confused by it.

However, upon immediately replacing it with myself, I managed to come to a certain understanding. For instance, even if I, by some accident, ended up going on a date with an idol-like girl from this school, if a friend happened to stumble onto the sight and asked whether she is my girlfriend? If I get teased like that, at the same time as I would feel embarrassed, I would also feel something akin to a superiority complex. It's just, in this case, there is the pride of having the clear status as the 'school's idol' and whether or not Satou feels something like that towards me or not is strongly questionable.

"Speaking of which, Satou-san, you don't have a boyfriend yet right?".

"Y-Yeah".

The persistent attacks from Karuizawa didn't end, rather they continued to come one after another. I half-listened to what she had to say while thinking about how to safely pull through the unexpected double date.

And for a little while longer, as I answered the questions coming from Karuizawa, the elusive time continued on.....

"We'll be enjoying this on our own so the two of you, don't mind us ok?".

Eventually, saying that, Karuizawa turned towards Hirata. So after saying everything she wanted to say she's leaving, huh. Karuizawa's goal here is relatively predictable but even so, there are still plenty of aspects I still don't understand.

In any case, in the double date from now on we'll be acting as a group but basically it still means we still have to carry on a conversation between the two of us. I did not understand that particular rule, or more like delineation, very well but let's just say I don't mind.

The problem starts here. I don't know what to talk with Satou about or what's the correct answer to that. Even as a classmate, I don't know much about Satou. During the nonexistent time I had, I did make a move to obtain more information on her but I barely received any useful clues from it. From the rooftop incident to the winter vacation, I did not have the opportunity to make contact with Satou either. If I had more time until the date, I might have been able to slightly improve the situation. However, Satou should also be in this same, fumbling situation. She should also be nervous. Of course, up until the

day before, I did more or less think of several ad-lib questions.

What foods do you like? What are your hobbies? Such cliché things. But when it really came down to it, they are rather hard to ask.

Uwa, this guy's doing exactly as the manual on the internet said, it's just I didn't want to be thought of like that.

As I was pondering over the topic, perhaps she realized my silence, but for a moment Karuizawa looked over at me. And our gazes met for just under a second.

"You're being rather quiet. Isn't it difficult to keep playing the quiet role?"

"It's not like I'm acting or anything. I'm not used to dates, I just don't understand the lifestyle of those with topics to discuss".

Such an interaction was exchanged between us just with our gazes alone. Naturally, I just imagined Karuizawa's words like that. And when I went on forever without saying a word.....

"Satou-san, isn't it just that Ayanokouji-kun doesn't know what to talk about?"

As if to break up the silence, a single arrow released by Karuizawa flew at us. It seems almost everything I imagined earlier was accurate. Towards that, Satou showed a relaxed expression as she began the conversation.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, do you happen to like idols?"

It seems Satou had also been thinking of various topics as well as she asked me that. A soaring ball, thrown, it flew towards an easy-to-catch position.

"Idol, I'm honestly not too familiar with those.....I don't have any I particularly like or dislike. Do you like them, Satou?"

"I quite like them myself, I do like the cool idols too but I guess the hot thing right now are those girl idol groups. Haven't you heard of them? There are about 50 of them".

"Yeah, I see them on the TV every day. The group with the striking song and dances right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I really like them, you see. They also have plenty of good songs too".

"Hmm.....".

I was overwhelmed by Satou who was forcefully on the attack like that.

"I can especially recommend their debut song so try listening to it. Next time, I'll lend you the CD".

"Thanks".

Upon answering with that, I realize I've made a mistake in the back-and-forths of our conversation. Our conversation had naturally run itself dry. If I only reply with a 'Aha!', that would be the equivalent of onesidedly having her throw me the ball. The ball I receive, must naturally be returned by none other than me.

"What kind of songs do you usually listen to?".

Once again, regardless of whether she realizes my distress or not, Satou once again threw me the ball. Towards this ball that is known as the topic of discussion being thrown at me, I'll endeavour to properly return it to her this time. So what kind of songs I usually listen to, huh? It's surprisingly simple and an easy-to-answer topic. Or I thought so. However, the song that had come to mind got stuck in my throat.

If I honestly opened up about my interests, what would happen? If I pull out Beethoven and Mozart here, then it's definitely an out. But even so, answering with healing music such as the sound of raindrops and the singing of birds, would also be a mistake.

In other words what my interests are, would be something to ignore in regards to this question. The answer she's expecting would probably be a famous musician or idol group's, basically a modern song. I need to answer with something towards Satou's expectant look.

".....this year, there was this popular movie, wasn't there? An anime".

"Ahh yeah, yeah. That romance movie right? I was really touched by it---".

"The group that performed its theme song, something like that, I've been listening to something like that recently".

Although I don't quite remember the name of the group, I've listened to that song countless times. Using that as a hint, I continued our conversation.

"Ahh---! I get it! I really get it! I really like it too!"

It seems I managed to properly return the ball, as Satou caught the ball as if in celebration. It's just, as this topic of discussion deepens, it starts coming apart at its seams.

I need to properly overcome that.

"You're very knowledgeable".

"Really? I think it's pretty normal though".

It seems the creatures known as girls, when it comes to matters like this, they are far more knowledgeable than I had expected. I did hear once that the distribution of roles between the male and female genders that had existed ever since the primitive ages had strongly permeated its way into the modern era but this might just be an example of that.

It seems females really have polished their communication skills.

"You aren't participating in any club activities right now, are you? Were you part of the track and field club before?"

The topic of discussion changed to clubs. Why did it end up like this, is quite an easy matter to understand. It likely is related to the relay I participated in during the sports festival.

"No, I've never been a part of any club before".

"Really? Even though that's the case, to think you're that fast, isn't that amazing? I mean, you were even faster than that student council president!"

As I told her that I had always been a part of the go-home club, for some reason Satou became excited as though she were impressed.

Perhaps Satou's gleefulness was too conspicuous but Karuizawa cast a side glance at us and cut in with a single phrase.

"Isn't it just that the student council president was too slow? Making us think he's really fast and the truth is it was just a battle between two slowpokes?"

"I really don't think that's the case, Karuizawa-san. Both of them were running extremely fast".

"Hmm, it's hard to believe all of a sudden though. Ayanokouji-kun seems like he'd be weak at fighting too. And besides, he surprisingly seems like a cold person, or rather, even if a person precious to him collapsed from a cold, he doesn't seem like the type to even pay them a visit~".

Bringing in the matter of fighting from a completely unrelated flow, I can feel sarcasm packed in there. And I realized that the primary cause of today's attack lied there.

Karuizawa, whose body was repeatedly chilled on that rooftop by Ryuen's actions and may have broken down in health, seems to be holding a grudge against me for not having been worried about her.

Could it be that the double date she proposed too, is her attempt to sabotage my actions and distract me.

"I don't see it that way though. I think Ayanokouji-kun is definitely a kind person".

"Ehh---? Really---?".

"I also think Ayanokouji-kun is a kind person".

"Uwa, it's almost like I'm the villain here".

Even though she says that dissatisfactorily, Karuizawa always stood out conspicuously as the center of the conversation at all times. I could see that she was following up for Satou while also bullying me.

And from the flow of that, I understood that her goal was to make me and Satou into a couple.

"U-Umm, you see? Umm, do.....".

Before I realized it, Satou had lost her smile. I had thought she had been turned off by the lack of discussion coming from me but that doesn't seem to be the case. It felt more like she is attempting to say something yet was unable to put it to words. Remaining silent for a while, I observed Satou's attitude but no words followed from her.

"Umm, hey. Is there anything you'd like to ask me?".

Saying that, she handed over the reins of the conversation to me. Indeed it is true that ever since a while ago, the topic of the conversation had revolved around only me. I should probably start a conversation revolving around Satou here.

"If you enroll in this school, you can't contact the outside right? Were you ever troubled by that?".

As I tried asking an unusual question like that, Satou began to think on it seriously.

"That's right.....I feel like there were various such troubles.....".

After thinking, Satou voiced what might be considered a particular trouble from amongst many.

"During middle school, I bought a cat you see. Now I think my mom is taking care of it for me but not being able to see my cat might be the hardest thing for me".

Increasing distance with one's family, might indeed be a general answer to that. Not being able to see a pet you loved might almost mentally be equivalent to a parent not being allowed to see their child.

"Not being able to see it for 3 years certainly sounds tough".

"Did Ayanokouji-kun also buy a pet or something?".

"Ahh, I wanted to buy a dog and was pretty interested in doing so but my parents forbade it".

It was true that I was interested in doing so, and so I simply answered like that.

"I see. Speaking of dogs, the other day I saw a little puppy on campus".

Satou said that.

"Ehh, really?".

Karuizawa, who said that she and Hirata would be enjoying themselves so don't mind them, for some reason once again joined in the conversation with

Satou. It seems she's been properly listening in on our conversation.

"Yep, on top of that it looked like it was someone's pet dog. It was really cute--".

"Since students can't buy pets it probably belonged to an adult, I suppose. One of the employees or a teacher".

Since it couldn't have possibly wandered onto the campus on its own, Hirata said that. Indeed, if you think about it, he has a point.

"A pet sounds great. It'd be the best thing ever if we could keep one in the dorms".

"I agree too. It'd be great if we had a pet shop here---".

"More like why can't we have one in the first place?".

"Yeah, that's true---. Even though they're selling various stuff here, not including pets is somehow unacceptable right?".

The two girls showed excitement in talking about pets, while the two boys were left hanging.

Indeed pets are healing, but keeping one in the dorms would cause several problems to arise. If the premise is to let one person buy one pet each, there's the possibility that hundreds of animals would be kept in the dorms. And in leaving them for half a day when going to school, numerous problems would arise in all those rooms. Inevitably, one cannot help but accept the fact that pets cannot be kept but it doesn't seem as though it would lead to that idea. Logical reasons, such things wouldn't even enter their minds. Cute or uncute. Whether or not they want to keep it, that is the only conclusion their conversation led to.

".....what a trifling thought".

I am thinking of something terribly dull. Even I am keenly aware of that fact. Right now what's needed here isn't that realistic kind of talk. One will not be able to buy a pet. Even if I yammer on about that fact I would only end up spoiling this.

"I'd like to buy a rabbit. Breeding them is quite easy and they seem quite

docile".

Honestly going along with the flow of the girls' conversation, Hirata said that. And both girls agreed with a smile. I'm sure a man who is capable of carrying a conversation like this will be popular. Before I realized it, the topic of pets ended and the time had come to search for a new topic of discussion.

As I thought about this and that wondering what to do, my gaze met Satou's.

"H-Hey Ayanokouji-kun. Umm you see.....".

Satou had regained her usual attitude up until now but it seems now, all of a sudden, the words were again stuck in her.

It seems whenever Satou has something she truly means to ask, her nervousness hits its peak. Whether this is something that only happens when the opposite sex is involved, or whether this is how she usually acts is unknown. However, she seemed to firm her resolve and spit out her words.....but then closed her mouth again.

It's probably something that's harder to ask than her previous question.

"What type of girl does Ayanokouji-kun like?".

Before Satou's words came out, Karuizawa beside her asked me that question.

"I-I'd like to hear about that too".

Satou agreed too as if piggybacking off of it. Satou did not complain about having her question interrupted. I wonder if by any chance, she was going to throw the same question at me.

Could it be that this double date is not just a mere coincidence, it's starting to seem that way. I did vaguely sense it from the start but it seems I should interpret this as being a set up. In any case, I need to answer the question. My type of girl, huh?

".....it's somewhat difficult to answer".

Satou, who was looking at me with glittering eyes and Karuizawa who was glaring at me. And Hirata, who was looking at me, seemingly entertained. Those were the looks of those three individuals.

"The genki type.....someone like that?".

That was a word that I earnestly had to wring out of myself but hearing it now as my preference, it sounds dubious. Since there were many girls who could be considered the genki type, I chose that word with the intention of not causing any damage here but it didn't go as I had thought it would.

"Surprising. I didn't think Ayanokouji-kun would be into that kind of girl".

Could it be, Satou and Karuizawa aren't genki type girls? I can safely say they're not the Horikita type but Kushida and Ichinose too are the genki type.....right?

"Could it be that Ayanokouji-kun thinks there are only two types of girls, the genki type and the quiet type?".

It can't be, such a sharp statement came from Karuizawa.

"Is that true?".

"No, that's not true. I'm a relatively quiet type so on the contrary, I thought I'd appreciate a girl who would tug me along better. If I've made a mistake in expressing it through words then I'll correct it".

I answered like that but I have a feeling it was not properly conveyed to Satou and the others.

"Then, what's between you and Horikita-san?".

Again all of a sudden, such a question came forth from Karuizawa. That's completely unrelated right? I wanted to say that but Satou's expression had clearly changed.

This too, is probably a question that Satou had wanted to ask. And towards Satou, who's finding it difficult to ask, I should take this to mean that Karuizawa is asking me this in her place.

There are not many students in our class who correctly understand the relationship between me and Horikita but among those students who understand it correctly is Karuizawa. The very fact that such a question came forth is unnatural. There's no doubt this is for Satou's sake. If Satou is serious in

holding affections towards me as a member of the opposite sex then she would have opened up about that to Karuizawa and I can see the path that led to the double date. In other words, for that purpose, she requested Karuizawa to be her backup shooter. Probably they're attempting to fill up the outer moat through probing various things out.

I felt like Karuizawa, while invisible, is targeting me somewhere. I don't know who it was that came up with the double date we're having now but I can surmise that the one who's coming up with the fine details of the plan is Karuizawa.



"I don't have anything going on at all with Horikita. As a matter of fact, even on Christmas we're going about our own business".

The very fact that Horikita isn't here right now is above all else, proof of that. I tried to appeal to them like that.

"But, just because that's true doesn't mean there's really nothing between you two, right?".

That should have been enough, yet Karuizawa continued hounding me.

"Couldn't it be the pattern where Ayanokouji-kun is interested in Horikita-san, yet she wouldn't give you the time of day and you want to ask her out yet you don't have the courage to do so?".

".....indeed".

If one considers it seriously, that would also be a possibility.

"S-So? Was it annoying that I asked you out?".

Anxiously, as though peering out, Satou looked at me.

"I told you earlier but if I really thought it was an annoyance, I would have declined beforehand".

"I see. That's a relief.....!".

"But there's also that, isn't there? Since the girl you like won't give you the time of day, there are boys who like to keep insurance. A girl they keep in reserve in case they can't go out with the one they really like, something like that".

A spiteful question like that was thrown at me from Karuizawa. Does she really see a person capable of doing such a deft thing here? Even if I ask her that, it'll be over if she replies that she does. It might be that Karuizawa is hounding me like this for Satou's sake. It's like diving into the Nile river with a crocodile swimming about in it.

"Do I really look like someone who's capable of doing such a deft thing?".

"Yes you do?".

".....oi".

Even though I knew it, I tried diving in anyways and I got brilliantly chomped for it.

"Your true love is Horikita-san but you're keeping Satou-san as insurance and playing around with her, that possibility is also there right?".

She's no longer trying to uplift Satou, it seems Karuizawa's more so trying to drop me instead. Could it be that she's not trying to make things work out between me and Satou, but rather trying to show Satou that a person like me wouldn't be suitable for her.

"I don't think Ayanokouji-kun is the type of person who would do something like that".

Towards that harsh statement from Karuizawa, Satou objects.

"Right, Ayanokouji-kun?".

"I'm not that adept after all".

I managed to escape from Karuizawa's fierce attack. Just as I was thinking that, the third attack came.

"But you know, Ayanokouji-kun gets along well with Kushida-san too right?".

"Ehh, really?".

I didn't realize that, as though saying that Satou jumped up and down in surprise.

"In Kushida's case, I'd say she gets along with just about everybody though.....".

This is no longer just the crocodile chomping me, it's bursting forth from the water and soaring into the sky.

"Don't you think the majority of boys want to date Kushida-san?".

"Do you really think so? Hirata?"

In order to escape from that crocodile, I decided to seek help from Hirata. If he understands that I'm in trouble here, he should take action to properly help me out.

"Indeed I do think Kushida-san is very popular but I don't think everyone feels that way. And besides, I don't think Ayanokouji-kun has a special someone he feels that way about yet, wouldn't you say?"

You're exactly right, Hirata. You answered 100% in the way I had hoped for. At the same time as resolving this misunderstanding about Kushida, it will also resolve problems other than that too.

"If Yousuke-kun says so, I'm sure that must be the case then".

Even though she still seemed dissatisfied, Karuizawa stops. Hirata's words carry a mysterious weight to them and they are not something that's simply overruled. If it's Satou, she would feel this much more strongly.

Nice, Hirata. Amazing, Hirata. Go, go, Hirata.

"Hey, the four of you there. Do you have some time?"

As the four of us came close to the movie theater, a voice called out to us from behind. As we each turned back to look.

"You're Ayanokouji, aren't you?"

".....yes I am".

And who might you be? Those words retreated back down into my throat. A sharp glint in his eye, and with a freshness about him, I'm familiar with this man.

There's not a single student in this school who doesn't know him. 2nd year Class A Nagumo Miyabi. And beside Nagumo were several male and female students who are probably friends of his. And among those members were students from the student council as well. Secretaries Mizowaki and Tonokawa.

And Vice President Kiriya as well. And female members of the student council too.

And then, the only one from amongst the 1st years whose name made it to the student council. The figure of that girl was also there. 1st year Class B Ichinose Honami.

She did not recklessly come forth from amongst the lineup, and when our gazes briefly met, she only smiled in response. The other student council members other than Ichinose did not pay any attention to me, and continued their conversations.

But, the eminent appearance of several senior students. The atmosphere of this place became heavy.

"You're 1st year right? Miyabi's friend?"

Most of the senior students did not pay any attention to us, but a single girl glanced towards us. A while ago, when I had passed by this senior student on the road, she had dropped her amulet. But even so, there's no way she could possibly know about me.

"I've never talked with him before. You don't remember? He was the student who fought against Horikita-senpai in the relay at the sports festival".

"Ahh---. I thought I remembered you from somewhere.....so it was from that time".

"Shall we have a chat then? You have time don't you?"

I ended up being called out by Nagumo like that. Right now, it's obvious to anyone that the four of us were out playing. However, not only a senior student but also the new student council president, being invited out by someone like him, one cannot just rudely decline. Towards this unexpected incident, Satou withered and Karuizawa also seemed slightly upset.

Seeing those two like that, Hirata immediately steps forward. Among us, he's

probably the only one who can go face-to-face against Nagumo.

But even so, we're playing so we don't have time please leave it for next time, he can't simply say something like that either. I wonder how he's intending on resolving this.

"Good morning, Nagumo-senpai".

"Yo, Hirata. How's soccer going?"

Nagumo, before assuming the title of student council president, had been affiliated with the soccer club. It seems he's decided to take advantage of that fact to initiate the conversation.

"Everyone's doing their best. Next time, please join in our practice. Umm, senpai, did Ayanokouji-kun do something?"

Looking slightly anxious, Hirata cut in like that.

"Hmm? Ahh no, that's not the case. There's no way I'd bully my kouhai, right? This is just out of curiosity".

Nagumo said that while laughing, but that laughter did not reach his eyes at all. As long as I don't cut in, the flow here won't change at all.

"Do you have business with me?"

I answered him in a slightly rigid tone.

"Don't be so cautious. But that's an impossible task right? Please go on ahead".

Perhaps he thought that a large crowd would intimidate me, but Nagumo told his friends that.

"Hurry up and come ok~?"

"Got it".

It doesn't seem like he has any intention of letting us go, but Nagumo had his

entourage go off ahead somewhere. Looking at their backs, I could infer something.

"We're going to the karaoke. After this, do you want to join us?"

"No thank you.....".

"I was joking. If someone like you who's not even my friend joins us, the atmosphere there would get spoiled".

This time he derisively laughs at me.

"So you're the student Horikita-senpai's paying attention to.....I'm just playing along with those rumors".

"Senpai, are you talking about that time during the relay?"

Hirata barged into the conversation to back me up.

"Yeah, you were watching too right?"

"Yes, because I already knew Ayanokouji-kun's really fast".

That was a lie made up by Hirata but Nagumo has no way to ascertain the truth.

"But other than that, Ayanokouji-kun shouldn't have anything that attracts the attention of senpai and the others".

"Indeed he only looks like an ordinary student. Except for that speed you spoke of.....huh".

Nagumo, with a sharp expression on his face, strongly gripped my arm.

Towards that abnormal sight, naturally the other three would be surprised. It was a dangerous situation, it must have looked as though a fight were about to break out. Even Hirata, who was close to Nagumo, for a moment froze up.

"President Nagumo, your face is quite scary---".

So that the situation does not progress any further, Karuizawa laughed and

approached Nagumo.

"Did I scare you? Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to".

Nagumo looked at Karuizawa with a serene expression.

But he did not let go of my arm. Then he returned his gaze towards me.

"Unfortunately, I know all about Horikita-senpai. If that man has seen something in you, then that something definitely exists".

"You sure know a lot about the student council president".

"The 'former' student council president, you mean. I'm looking forward to this, Ayanokouji. Once that man graduates, a boring one year awaits me. To fulfill my desires, become my opponent, ok?".

I knew that there were various things going on between the older Horikita and Nagumo, but for him to be obsessed to the point it overflows from the person in question and affect even me. That was slightly unexpected.

It was because I had thought Nagumo was the type who would be fine as long as he himself and his surroundings are having fun. But looking at this attitude, that doesn't seem to be the case.

He seems to place great importance on showing everyone just how strong he is, just how amazing he is.

"Then allow me to ask just one thing".

As I, who had been passive up until now, asked that, for the first time Nagumo slightly smiled.

"Back then, when you assumed the role of student council president, you said you would make this school more interesting, by having everything be decided by ability. Specifically, what are you intending on doing?".

Having come this far, even if I indulge in a bit of conversation, there's no loss to me in particular. Thinking that, I tried asking.

"I don't know what kind of exams you 1st years have done, but they should all have been boring, pompous ones. I'm fed up with such exams, you see. That's right, a special exam based on a popular virtual online game, don't you think that sounds interesting?"

"Virtual online game.....?"

I was reminded for a moment of those apps you play on your phone but immediately afterwards, Nagumo laughed and said this.

"Don't be so serious".

Letting go of my hand which he had been gripping the entire time, Nagumo laughs once again. But the laughter did not reach his eyes.

"I apologize for interrupting your date. See you around".

Saying that, Nagumo followed his friends and walked off towards the karaoke. Before long, a silence fell upon us.

"Fuu---. That was quite a happening, wasn't it?"

Hirata, who pats his chest at the fact that nothing happened.

On the contrary, Satou, who had withered and had fallen silent until now, burst out.

"A-Amazing, Ayanokouji-kun! T-To think the student council president thinks so highly of you!"

"No, it's not really that impressive".

I replied like that while being pushed around by Satou, who's in high spirits.

"I'm not really convinced by this somehow. I mean, the only thing Ayanokouji-kun is good at is running right? Yousuke-kun's 100 times more amazing. He's really fast. He's good at studying too. If someone should be paid attention to, it's strange if that person isn't Yousuke-kun---?"

Right? As if asking that, Karuizawa speaks to Hirata with a smile.

"I do think Hirata-kun is amazing but.....but, but I don't think Ayanokouji-kun will lose to him!".

While I am happy that she proudly followed up for me like that, I didn't really ask for her to go that far. Evaluating me without making me out to be good or bad would be for the best. And more than anything, saying that made Karuizawa interject.

"She's saying he won't lose but, compared to Hirata-kun, isn't he completely useless at studying?".

"T-That is.....he's still smarter than me!".

Indeed, I won't deny that, but is that fine, Satou?

"Isn't it great, Ayanokouji-kun? That Satou-san thinks so highly of you? Even though it feels like you gained all that just by running fast?".

"Maybe".

I accepted Karuizawa's awfully strong words that were praising me.....or not.

In any case, I understood that for the whole day today, Karuizawa plans to keep on belittling me.



Part 3

The movie theater at Keyaki Mall had been crowded with people ever since a few days ago. The impact that the newly released movie had and equipment troubles may have had something to do with that.

Of course, I could not see the figure of Ibuki anywhere here. Perhaps she simply has no interest in a 3D anime produced by an overseas film company, or perhaps she simply predicted this crowd and avoided it.....she'll probably come and watch it later.

Having been issued the tickets we had all booked in advance, handing over the ticket's stub we entered.

"T-That's right, Karuizawa-san. I'd like you to accompany me to the toilet".

"That's right. The screening's going to start soon".

Saying that, Satou dragged Karuizawa slightly forcefully and headed off towards the toilet.

Only me and Hirata were left.

".....how should I put it, good job".

The first word that came out was an honest one like that. Hirata is letting his precious Christmas go to waste just to accompany Karuizawa, who he's only in a fake relationship with. I honestly respect him for that. Or could it be he also holds some genuine feelings towards Karuizawa, could something like that also be possible?

"Karuizawa-san's the classmate I first thought I had to save no matter what, you see".

From the look in his eyes, I could tell that he did not see Karuizawa as a romantic partner. It was the eyes of Hirata Yousuke, who puts in an effort daily for the sake of his classmates.

"I'm really grateful to you, Ayanokouji-kun. Regarding the matter with Karuizawa-san".

"I don't recall having done anything be thanked for though".

"I'm really thankful for the fact that during the shipboard test, you and Karuizawa-san happened to be placed in the same group. She's now able to walk on her own without my existence beside her".

Hirata then sighed a sigh of relief, almost as though he had slowly put down a baggage he'd been carrying.

"That hasn't happened yet, has it?".

"Is it because I'm still acting out the role of her boyfriend?".

"Yeah".

Mentally speaking, Karuizawa has become stronger. She's grown. Hirata could sense it too. However, growth in the truest sense of the word lies there.

"That's only a matter of time, is what I think. Recently, communication between us has been dialed down to a bare minimum. Leaving aside exceptional patterns like today, I don't think I'm necessary to her anymore".

Certainly, as Hirata had sensed, it seems Karuizawa is already walking forward on her own. If it's not just something I've noticed but something a third party has also sensed then there's no mistaking it.

"I may be asking something uncouth here, but was this fine for Christmas?".

"Yeah. I am Karuizawa-san's boyfriend after all. At the very least up until now, I didn't have anything going on with any other girl. Probably, from now on as well".

"From now on as well?".

In regards to the future he has no way of knowing for certain, Hirata said that as though he were prophesizing it.

"You know, Ayanokouji-kun. As long as everybody around me is getting along with each other, I'm satisfied with just that".

"So that's why you're saying you don't need any romance?".

"That's right, I suppose. At the very least right now I feel that way".

He's blessed with such looks, such a personality and such skills and yet, it's such a shame.

"How about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Are you intending on going out with Satou-san?".

"No.....".

I don't intend on doing such a thing, but if I deny it like that it would be the same as denying the very act of going on this date itself and so I stopped short.

"I wonder. I don't think anything of it right now".

I could not do anything else except answer with that.

"It may not be my place to say this after saying I'm not into romance myself but it may do you some good to try going out with someone, Ayanokouji-kun".

"You've never had a girlfriend before, right? Is that what you're trying to interject with here?".

"Hahaha, that's not it. Certainly I did think that you've never been in a relationship before but that's not because Ayanokouji-kun isn't popular right? Isn't it just because you've never found yourself a girl who could be your romantic partner, right?".

"Honestly if I had to say it's both. I had never been particularly popular and there was never a romantic partner for me either".

That is why romance can't possibly develop. In the White Room, there wasn't any rule expressly forbidding romance like there is for idols but things that would allow a romance to successfully be established absolutely didn't exist

there. Playtime, holidays, such things didn't exist there. Other than toilet breaks and bath times, we were constantly monitored. A romantic development cannot conceivably occur.

"Isn't that way of living tiring? Always putting yourself second, to spend your school life for the sake of your class only?"

I tried throwing such an obvious question like that at him.

"Tiring? No such thing. On the contrary, for me, a class lacking in cohesion is far tougher. Honestly, the anxiety I had felt after enrolling has mostly abated".

That's because almost immediately after arriving at this school, Hirata had taken action to bring the class together as one.

On the uninhabited island, the class cohesion broke down majorly, and temporarily, a shadow had loomed over Hirata's mental state. However, recently to the point it was obvious even to me, Class D had begun to show off its cohesion. I could not see any sort of underhanded bullying going on in class too. Leaving aside the external factor that is Class C, however. Hirata Yousuke is an extremely important central figure for Class D. If Hirata had not been there, undoubtedly Class D would still be alone at the very bottom. However, Hirata also has a fragile.....somewhat uncertain side to him.

The uninhabited island test had ended without any incident but should the collapse of the class go beyond what happened that time, there's no telling what would become of Hirata.

The reason I am thinking about this now is because the existence of Kushida is on my mind. Back during middle school, there had been a case where Kushida had caused the collapse of a class. And even now, in regards to Horikita, she's showing signs of doing the same.

In other words what it means is that if it becomes necessary for her, she may even airdrop a bomb like that onto our class. If such a thing were to occur, the burden it would place on Hirata's heart would be quite substantial.

If the central figure stops functioning, there's no telling what might happen to the currently united Class D. Having checked that those two have not yet returned, I decided to talk about something slightly different.

"How much do you know about President Nagumo, Hirata?"

Since they belonged to the same club, even amongst the 1st years, he should be the one to know something about Nagumo. I had judged that with this timing, it would be easy to ask him.

"I wonder. I only met him as one of my seniors in the club, I don't usually meet him you see. And what's more, when he assumed the office of student council president, most of that only involved exchanging greetings".

"Then whatever impressions and such you have of him is fine too".

I changed my angle slightly like that and tried asking again.

"As for my first impression of him, an interesting senpai, I suppose. Even during soccer practice, he progressively adopted novel ideas, that sort of person. Naturally, it's not like everything went well all the time but ultimately, he was interesting, was how I thought of him. Even though practice was supposed to be a harsh and brutal affair".

Hirata then laughed as though remembering the scene of that practice.

"In the end, he always produces results or rather, levels up. Even before we enrolled, it seems Nagumo-senpai's been producing results even in tournaments".

"I see. So it means he's a perfect senpai".

"That is, once again a slightly different matter".

I had thought he would have affirmed it, but Hirata shook his head.

"In the shadow of that glory, there are also hardships accompanying it. It seems there are plenty of people who have quit the club".

"But there haven't been any bad rumors, have there?"

"Isn't that because they are no longer in this school? The 2nd year seniors who came into conflict with Nagumo-senpai all ended up quitting the club, and soon afterwards, dropping out of school as well it seems".

"So it's not just the club they quit, but they also dropped out of school?"

"I don't know the details either. I don't know how much Nagumo-senpai was involved in it".

It may just be that Nagumo was only part of a long chain of events. It is also highly possible that those students dropped out of school for personal reasons.

However, it is also a fact that this makes me uneasy. That's because the older Horikita had also said something similar. That Nagumo thoroughly eliminates any existence that's an obstacle to him.

That as a result, the 2nd years have become monolithic. If Nagumo is the light, then anyone who opposes him would be the darkness. He did thoroughly crush said darkness, but the world is not that simple. At the end of a light, there is always a shadow. No matter how much one attempts to eliminate it, it would only result in new shadows forming.

"Could it be, Ayanokouji-kun is intending on joining the student council?"

From the flow of the conversation thus far, it couldn't be helped even if that is Hirata's inference.

"No, I have no such intention".

I made that clear to him. Even if the end result was Horikita declining to join the student council, me entering the student council would absolutely not happen. But there is a need to think of countermeasures. Unlike simply asking for a small favor, joining the student council would have a massive impact on one's daily life as well. If it's Karuizawa, she would definitely obey such an order, but looking at it in terms of pros and cons, it's obvious that she's not suitable for

that. Following my orders, and on top of that, being someone who could join the student council of their own merits without it coming off as strange. There's barely anyone who could overcome all three of those hurdles.

"I see, I do think if it's Ayanokouji-kun, you'll be able to pull it off though".

"That's my line, Hirata. You yourself are a good fit for the student council, you know".

"I'm not a good fit, and besides, I don't want to quit my club activities".

It seems until graduation, Hirata has no intention of quitting soccer. If Hirata would have joined the student council, there was the possibility that the cards available to me would have increased by one, though.

But I won't hound him on that matter here.

Because I have no intention of changing from my outfield position.

"Leaving aside the student council business, starting from next month, we'll probably be in a difficult position".

"That is, you mean to say, because we'll be ascending to Class C?".

"Yeah, the upper classes will be cautious of us and the lower class will pursue us too. Not to mention the difference between the class points is being bridged. If we mess it up, once February comes around, we may drop back down to Class D".

It's natural to have such misgivings.

Class points change almost on a monthly basis. If even a trivial mistake were to be made, a development like the one Hirata predicted might even come to pass.

"Should such a time come to pass, the problem is whether or not we can put in the effort".

"I do think everyone does want to ascend all the way up to Class A, though".

"Even if a colossal amount of effort and luck would be required for that to happen, do you think those feelings of theirs would remain unchanged?"

"That's the problem isn't it? Ultimately to aim for the upper classes would mean exposing the class to a massive burden".

If one can choose freely, then naturally everyone would choose Class A.

That is something even someone completely uninterested in the conflict between classes like Kouenji would choose. However, there is a difference in the conditions that are required for Class A and the other classes.

"I'm-----".

Just as Hirata was about to continue, a voice called out to us.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokouji-kun!"

Although we were still in the middle of our conversation, Satou and Karuizawa had returned. Since the screening of the movie is about to begin, we cut our conversation off and together, the four of us headed inside the theater.

Part 4

I don't usually watch 3D anime but it was interesting enough to betray my expectations. Expertly recreating the various movements and expressions of the animals, and a story that is capable of passionately moving you. Even though it was a simple approach, by pursuing that simple approach it becomes like this, that is how I'd describe this craftsmanship.

Carrying the juice we had brought into the hall in both my eyes, I leave the theater with Satou.

"That was interesting!"

Towards Satou, who was speaking excitedly like that, I could not do anything except agree. I was just getting hungry too. Slightly behind us, Hirata and Karuizawa also returned from the theater.

In order to have our pre-reserved lunch, the four of us start moving. In the

meantime, my conversation with Satou, between the two of us, started up once again.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun.....do you mind if I ask you something slightly thoughtless?".

Perhaps watching a movie together has closed the distance between us a bit, but compared to earlier, Satou was closer to me. Rather than physical closeness, it would be more precise to say that the distance between our hearts had closed by half a step.

"If there's something you'd like to ask, please ask away".

It wasn't like I would answer just about anything, but if there's anything I could afford to answer, I intend on doing so.

"Ahh, I want to ask to~o".

Even though she herself said that we should have separate conversations, once again Karuizawa barged in. From Hirata, who was watching this situation unfold, an opinion came forth.

"This looks like a good opportunity, why don't we ask each other questions we've been thinking about asking?".

I felt this was not such a bad proposal. I could also use this occasion to ask Hirata the questions I've been wanting to ask him yet could not.

"Agreed~ Then I'll go first".

Upon expressing her agreement, Karuizawa immediately turned her gaze towards me.

"Did Ayanokouji-kun ever go out with someone before?".

I was asked that question just earlier by Hirata. No, to be precise, rather than ask me that he saw through me. I never thought that in one day, I would receive a similar question twice. Basically, I've don't have a girlfriend = pathetic. As a boy, such a prevailing view is pretty sad.

It's not something I could answer pleasantly, but Karuizawa and Satou's gazes were passionately concentrated on me. Leaving aside Satou, Karuizawa's attitude seemed like she was just completely playing around with me.

"I don't have one right now".

Even as I answered honestly like that, I tried including an implication into it. If I express it that way 'I had one in the past' it could also be interpreted that way.

"Alright. Your age equals the number of years without a girlfriend, I got it".

I was intending on answering ambiguously, but as though that clinched it, Karuizawa said that.

"You know, Ayanokouji-kun. That's an excuse unpopular men use, I think it'll serve you well to remember that? 'Right now', including that makes it suspicious".

"Really? Even if I had a girlfriend in the past, if I don't have one right now, I think I'd include the 'right now' though".

"Then you had one in the past?".

"No.....I didn't".

"See? As I thought!".

Karuizawa happily frolics about. More or less, Satou also seems happy.

I had a feeling Karuizawa's theory was flawed but I did not have the material to deny her with either.

"I don't think not having had a girlfriend is something you should mind, though. Like, if you're blatantly unpopular like Yamauchi-kun or Onizuka-kun then in that case, that's a minus for you but searching for someone you want to go out with, or more like you're just not in a rush. That's it right, Ayanokouji-kun?".

Saying that, Satou followed up for me.

"Satou-san understands Ayanokouji-kun pretty well".

"It'd be great.....if I could understand him. But, I still don't know anything about him. Let me ask you too, ok? So, Ayanokouji-kun. Between a girl with long hair and a girl with short hair, which do you prefer?".

Yet another question comes flying at me. The question that's thrown at me this time, too, is pretty straightforward. The presence or absence of a girlfriend, the type of girl I like and now my preference in hairstyles. Combining all these questions and it feels like a female image is appearing.

"I've never really minded it.....as long as it fits that person, whether it be long hair or short hair, it doesn't matter right?".

"Somehow that sounds like a model response---".

Indeed, thanks to me giving a model response like that, I received a pointing out from Karuizawa.

"I feel the same way. Whether it be boy or girl, as long as it suits that person, things like hairstyle aren't a problem".

Hirata's assist came at a superb timing. Perhaps seeing the unfavorable situation, Karuizawa gave a full smile towards Hirata.

"As I thought? Truthfully, I feel the same too. There are girls who change the length of their hair based on the preference of their partners but it's meaningless unless you prioritize whether or not it suits you, right?".

From the start, Karuizawa had endorsed Hirata and in front of people, sticks to Hirata-ism but as always, brilliant. Her headstrong personality and forcefulness are brilliantly showing up in her attitude.

If Karuizawa's goal here is to push me and Satou together, I don't know about planting a bad impression of me, sometimes predictions can be greatly off the mark.

"Not having any restraints on hairstyle and the such, I think that's a great thing!".

Far from having a negative impression of me, I could almost feel Satou's eyes slightly glittering. For some reason, Karuizawa too, was unexpectedly looking at Satou with eyes that seem to be saying 'Not bad Satou-san'.

In response to that statement that was meant to push me down, Satou saved and pushed me back up.

"Hey, Hirata, are you conscious of the fact that you're popular?".

Here I should seek the opinion of the peerless, great Hirata-sensei. Or so I thought, but for some reason, Karuizawa glares at me.

Satou, too, had a similar expression.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Rather than asking Yousuke-kun questions, shouldn't you be asking Satou-san?".

"That's right. Like this, it almost feels like Ayanokouji-kun and Hirata-kun are having a formal marriage interview?".

".....even if you say that".

In front of Satou, since Karuizawa and I have made it out to seem like we don't have much interaction with each other, we cannot switch onto a strange subject like that. But on the flip side, it's also hard to switch the subject towards Satou, who's a newcomer.

In that case, it can't be helped even if I feel like escaping towards Hirata, who's the easiest one to talk to. No matter what kind of sensitive topic I throw towards him, Hirata would properly handle it well. And besides, personally speaking, I do have something I'd like to ask Hirata so it can't be helped.

"Ask me anything, Ayanokouji-kun".

".....let's see.....".

As I searched for any clue that would allow me to escape, we reached the family restaurant where we would be having lunch. The conversation was once again suspended with a natural flow.

As Satou seems to have made a reservation beforehand, she smoothly guides us to our seats. At the seats she guided us to were towels and splittable chopsticks prepared for four people.

"It's for four".

The reservation was for two. On the table, only the ones prepared for me and Satou should have been there.

"Ahh, I heard about this place from Satou-san earlier when we went to the toilet. So we reserved more seats, right Satou-san?"

"Y-Yeah".

"Is that so? You're rather tactful".

"I guess so. When it comes to things like this, I'm a veteran you see".

Towards Karuizawa, who puffed out her chest in pride, I directed my gaze.

"You liar".

And. A gaze came back from Karuizawa.

"I don't want to hear that from Kiyotaka who's never even gone out with anyone before---".

Something like that.

"Don't you have anything you'd like to ask Satou-san, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Perhaps this is the cost of having gazed at her, but even after arriving at our seats I still could not escape from a topic like that. Karuizawa once again returned to that topic.

".....what do you usually do over the holidays?"

It was a topic I had brought forth since I was in trouble but towards that, Karuizawa blatantly showed a 'Wow' face.

"What is that? Is that a question you squeezed out?"

Ever since a while ago, Karuizawa's been showing a level of irritation that even Hirata could not comprehend. Why are you not making use of the information about Satou you procured beforehand? She should be wondering. However, it's not like I procured that information only to make this date successful in the first place. I had gathered that information because I had wanted to know more about the person known as Satou. The difference there is a large one.

"It's fine, Karuizawa-san. I'm happy that Ayanokouji-kun asked me something".

As she answered like that with a smile, Satou showed a slightly thoughtful gesture.

"Hmm. Basically I just play with my friends, I guess. It's boring if I'm alone".

Probably, with the group of girls that Satou gets along with. Somewhat, I could picture that in my head.

"But, sometimes, I might also look up various things on my own. Like fashion design for one".

Fashion design. A word I don't usually hear came forth from Satou.

"You see, I think becoming a designer might not be too bad either".

"Heh~that's a first. So Satou-san's like 'that'".

I don't know which 'that' that is, but it seems girls can have a conversation that only they can understand. Satou nodded over and over.

"If I can graduate from Class A, I was thinking I could get into a good place".

Saying that, Satou happily expands on her delusions. It's not a bad thing to expect the privileges that come with graduating from Class A, but it's best if she also considers something so that if she graduates from Class B or lower, it would still go well for her.

"So, does Ayanokouji-kun also have thoughts about what you'll do in the future?".

The ball I had thrown was gently returned to me from Satou.

".....university, I guess".

Not yet having thought of future occupations, I gave a safe answer.

"Uwa, I'd hate it. I won't be able to stand having to study even after graduating from high school, absolutely".

Having heard about going onto university, Satou gave a reaction that was of rejection.

"They say compulsory education is over with middle school but really, compulsory education lasts until high school, right? If I'm just a middle school graduate I'd be made fun of".

Leaving aside whether or not she'd be made fun of, it goes without saying that you'd need to at least come out of high school, such a current exists. Essentially, the expression compulsory education itself might not be an exaggeration.

"I might also be going onto university. Circles seem like they'd be really fun".

On the other hand, surprisingly enough, rather than reject the prospect of going onto university, Karuizawa answered like that while imagining university life. It was all still vague, but each and every one seems to be thinking about the future. So with this and that, it was a meal that allowed me to enjoy a different group from the usual. It's just, if this happens every day it would be extremely tiring, there was also such a weariness.

Part 5

After finishing our meals, it was just before 5 o'clock when we were done gallivanting about Keyaki Mall. A double date that had lasted almost 5 hours was also nearing its end. Looking back in hindsight, it might have been a day that could be described as being unexpectedly interesting. It's just, including

Karuizawa into it causes various problems so I'd like to decline next time.

"So what'll we do?".

I asked to check whether or not we'll disband. It could be that we might be going somewhere in addition, I included such a possibility in my field of vision but.....

"Then should we.....go back, Yousuke-kun?".

Karuizawa, who had been happily bullying me thoroughly up until just now, suddenly declared we go our separate ways. From here on out we'll only be a disturbance, suddenly she showed such a consideration.

It seems from this point onwards, to leave just the two of us alone with each other, there should be something she's aiming for. I could see Satou and Karuizawa sending signals to each other through eye contact. It's not hard to expand on that on my own with my imagination.

In any case, as if to agree with her, Hirata nods.

"It's getting late. Shall we go back, Karuizawa-san? Playing with you today was fun, Ayanokouji-kun. See you later too, Satou-san".

I spent the whole day today with Hirata, and indeed, his actions befit those of a saint or a sage. Hirata, who could interact well with all sorts of people. For someone unfamiliar with double dates, all the merits have come from none other than this man.

"Both of you, thanks for today".

It seems without taking any detours, Hirata and Karuizawa will be returning straight to the dorms. The two of them walk off quickly.

Satou saw them off warmly.

"So, what'll we do now?".

"Ummm, well. Shall we take a detour before going back?".

Satou proposed as such. Since I had no particular reason to decline, I gave my consent.

"That's right.....then, shall we go back from there?".

Having decided to take a little detour, we settled to head back with a delay. Satou, who had been talking at a machine gun pace up until a while ago, had become rather quiet now.

"Sorry, for having it turn into a double date".

"I was surprised at first".

"Those two really are amazing, huh? Their aura as a couple is completely different".

At all times, Karuizawa is moving to make sure Hirata, who is playing the role of her boyfriend, stands out conspicuously. That was conveyed to Satou too, and naturally, it also makes Karuizawa's existence seem larger.

"I really admire them~".

"Certainly".

Even though we were walking at a close distance, our hands never touched. The boldness she had shown when we were with Karuizawa and Hirata, not a single fragment of it could be seen now. By no means was it awkward but the atmosphere had changed into something out of the ordinary.

"Thank you for inviting me out today. I had fun".

I said that to break the silence but Satou's face remained uneasy.

"Hey Ayanokouji-kun.....you didn't have fun today, did you?".

I heard such a thing.

"No such thing".

I denied it because I honestly enjoyed it, but for some reason it didn't seem to have been conveyed to Satou.

"But.....".

"Why did you think something like that?".

Since I did not understand the reasoning, I tried asking.

"I mean, today Ayanokouji-kun didn't even laugh once.....".

"I didn't laugh, huh?".

Before I could give her an explanation regarding that, Satou continued speaking.

"I thought I would be able to see a smile from you at least once, but".

It seems Satou, even when she was together with me, was worried about such a thing.

In regards to the contents of the double date, I truly have no complaints though. As I pondered over how to explain that to her, Satou opened her mouth heavily.

"After all, does the fact that I said let's bully Horikita-san a while ago.....have something to do with this?".

She had anxious eyes. And a face that seemed like it was about to cry.

"Speaking of which, something like that did happen, huh?".

Soon after our enrollment, Horikita became isolated and she had a strong tendency to mock her classmates. That sort of thing was obvious and could not be helped, but Satou too, did not hold any goodwill towards Horikita and that is also a fact.

As a matter of fact, she had proposed once in our group chat to bully Horikita. I had knocked down that proposal but it seems the person in question herself has remembered that.

"I don't care about that. Or more like, up until now, I had almost forgotten

that happened".

".....really?".

"In the first place, it couldn't be helped even if Horikita were to be alienated at that point. And besides, just by having that as the topic of discussion on a chat where the person in question isn't even there, it's not like you took any actual actions. I won't judge someone based on something stupid like that".

Gossip is something every human voices universally. As long as one doesn't voice that in front of the person in question or take action in actuality, it won't become a significant problem. However, 'even if one gets gossiped about in return you can't complain about that', as long as you understand that aspect that is.

"Really?".

"Yeah, really".

"But, you didn't have fun did you? You didn't laugh".

"The reason I didn't laugh was.....how should I put it, I'm bad at laughing is why".

I followed up on that part I denied earlier. How much of this is conveyed to Satou, I honestly don't know. In all likelihood, she probably interpreted it as me saying this to console her. Truthfully, there are many ways to follow up on this. In regards to Karuizawa's questions during the day too, I'm confident I could have answered in a better way. However, I intentionally chose not to do so.

"She's not a partner I need to go that far for".

It was because I had made that judgement.

In that sense, the 'Did you not find it fun?' question from Satou would not necessarily be wrong either. I did find it fun as far as playing around goes, but it is certain that it was not the way Satou had been hoping for. It'll only be troublesome even if she likes me any further than this, I made such a decision.

"The reason I wasn't laughing, are you not convinced?".

"No.....that's not the case but".

A heavy silence fell upon us. Today, the whole day, not to overestimate myself but from Satou, I had received a considerably amount of goodwill. However, if at all possible, I'd like her to give up on that goodwill here.

That was why I acted like a man who could not keep a conversation going, and continued to act out a subtle behaviour. However, turning her back on me once, Satou brought something out of her bag and hid that something behind her.

"Umm, hey----".

And then she turns back to me. Looking as though she had firmed her resolve, Satou caught me with her strong gaze.

It seems like my wish won't be granted after all.

"Umm.....hey.....p-please go out with me! Ayanokouji-kun!!!".

Fuu~, a gust of wind blew.

The first ever genuine confession I had received in my life.

In the meantime, I'm going to ignore the person hiding in the bushes beyond my gaze.

Idly considering this at length here would only cause Satou to suffer. I immediately choose my words and deliver my judgement.

"I'm sorry, Satou. I cannot answer your expectations".

"!!!".

Towards Satou who had plucked up her courage and confessed, I answered with honesty like that. No, it's not like I hated Satou. It's not like I had any problems with her personality or looks either.

"I-I see. As I thought, it's impossible, huh?"

Showing me an expression that I'm not quite sure is a bitter smile, Satou desperately tried to keep up appearances so as to not let her smile crumble. Throughout the date, Satou should have slightly felt it too.

The fact that I appeared to not hold any sort of strong interest towards Satou.

"I-If you wouldn't mind, for future reference.....could you please tell me your reason, I wonder? Is it because you have someone else you like?"

"That's not the case. It's just, at this stage I can't go out with you. It's genuinely a problem with my own feelings".

In a situation where one is not in love with their partner, to choose to go out with them nevertheless would be insulting.

That is my reason on the front.

It is a respectable reason I should be confronting Satou with.

"It doesn't matter if it's Satou, or the one who unrelatedly came up in the conversation before, Horikita, or whether it's Kushida, the answer to all of them is the same. Even though I don't like you, going out with you regardless is something I cannot do".

Of course, even if it's Airi, who is probably thinking that internally as well, I would have given the same answer. It's only a matter of whether or not she decides to directly confront me with her feelings.

"It may be a pathetic story but I've never even once seriously fallen in love with a member of the opposite sex yet. That is why, it's not a matter of

dumping you or anything, it just means I haven't matured enough to be capable of romance yet".

".....I see".

I cannot do anything else but have her accept that fact.

"I may have rushed it too much. That's right, with just one date, you still won't know anything about your partner".

Even as she furrowed, as though attempting to convince herself Satou nodded over and over.

The confession, and the reply to it too, both of them must have required a tremendous amount of courage.

"I may have missed an opportunity".

I have just rejected the girl who eagerly told me of her feelings. Even I think this was a stupid choice. I want to find myself a girlfriend and live an average school life. I properly have those feelings in me.

If Satou would be my partner, there should be no complaints. Even now, telling her I've changed my mind please go out with me is still the correct judgement. But even so, my mouth has been sealed shut and would no longer open. The phone in my pocket vibrates. I don't know who it is, but it was an incoming call. Of course, I cannot answer it in this situation and so I ignored it.

During that time, Satou had been trying to return the wrapped box she held in her hands back into her bag.

Then, Satou raised her head and said this.

"Thank you for today, Ayanokouji-kun".

It was an expression that already knew that my reply and its contents would not change.

Even if in this moment, Satou tells me she likes me, there's no guarantee that

this would still be the case tomorrow.

From now on, I don't know whether or not she'll continue to like me or whether she will find a new love for herself. However the fact that Satou was the one who confessed to me for the first time in my life, is something I will never forget for the rest of my life.

"Is it.....ok if I invite you out to play again?".

Probably these are the farewell words that Satou gave it her best to squeeze out of her.

"Of course, I also do enjoy playing together with Satou, I also think I'd like to invite you out sometime too".

That is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, my real feelings.

"Ok".

A small nod came back in response.

I don't know to what extent I've conveyed this to Satou but the time of confession has now passed. Even though the heavy atmosphere had remained behind, our daily lives rapidly returned to us.

The cold winter wind blows, and pierces through our freezing bodies.

"It's getting cold. Shall we go back?".

Regardless of whether we wish for this or not, time is passing us by. We cannot afford to stand around here forever, just the two of us.

As I started to move, Satou remained in her spot without moving.

"Satou?".

As I thought that was strange and looked back, in Satou's eyes, large teardrops had been building up.

Before they could fall, she used her hands to wipe them away, and Satou laughed once.

"Sorry. I think I'll run back!".

Saying that, Satou stamped her feet on the snow, and leaving me behind, ran back towards the dorms. I could not call out to that back, all I could do was quietly see her off.

"I don't even need to think about it, huh".

There's no need for her to worry about being rejected by a person like me, looking at it from her perspective, it was something that occurred after she had plucked forth all of her courage.

As long as that feeling is not properly conveyed, she cannot naturally walk beside me and go back, huh? So that we don't run into each other later at the dorm, I saw her off until I could no longer see her back.

If the matter with the student council and the matter with my father did not exist, perhaps my answer might have been different. For a genuine 1st year schoolboy, I would have probably taken the hand of the girl who had given me her affections.

'If', was the premise of this thought. If this confession had taken place before the relay at the sports festival, I felt I would have accepted Satou. However, ironically, it was at that very relay that Satou had fallen for me. I objectively understand that my thought process is different from what's normal. I always act while prioritizing the prevention of calamities for myself.

"Now.....".

Before I go back, I should probably clean up the remaining problem.

Thinking that, just as I was about to call out towards the bushes. Beneath me, my phone once again rang. On the screen of the phone were the characters 'Unidentified Caller'.

I did think for a moment about ignoring it but I don't feel like this is simply a prank call.

I pushed the 'Call' button and pressed it to my ears. Even though I had wanted to at least determine the way the caller whose gender I don't even know would answer, even though I waited for a few seconds, the silence continued.

"Hello".

I tried calling out from my side once.

However, no reply came.

That is why I immediately decided to make my decision.

"I'm cutting the call".

"Can I trust you?".

Those were the words that came back from the broken silence.

They were words that didn't make any sense.

"This is rather sudden. I don't quite understand what exactly is this trust you're asking of me".

I returned the question while seeking an explanation.

"The anti-Nagumo campaign that Horikita-senpai speaks of. I was asking if you would become a cooperator".

It seems the older Horikita has told 'that' 2nd year student about me. To go out of their way to call me with an unidentified number, how cautious.

But the fact that they called me, probably means they intend on meeting me afterwards.

Even if they hide their phone number, they're letting me hear their voice. If not, it would be very strange.

"Just in case I want to ask. What's your name?".

Even though the older Horikita had told them my number, it seems he didn't tell them my identity.

Well, they did let me hear their voice and they know my number too anyways. If they were to investigate it further, it wouldn't be too difficult for them to trace it back to me.

"I don't think I'm obliged to answer".

Even though they understood too, I declined.

"I suppose that's fine. I remember that voice. I more or less have a rough idea now".

So they have an idea, huh. Since it's like that, I too feel like I generally have a mark on them. There are not many 2nd years who are also familiar with my voice.

"This may be a sudden thing to say but I want to meet you right now".

As expected, they cut in with that.

However, there's no need for me to tell them I had already expected that I suppose.

"That is also indeed a sudden thing. Is it fine for you to not be more cautious?".

It's almost dusk, soon the sun will set.

"There's no problem on my end. If you have the desire to, that is. Can you meet up immediately?".

I glanced at the bushes.

"Yeah. You're in luck too".

"Luck, you say?".

"Honestly if it's not right now I was about to refuse".

On the other side of the phone, the other person is probably feeling a sense of mystery. If it's right now it's fine, they're probably contemplating the meaning of the words I had just said.

Such things, even if they contemplate there's no way they'd reach an understanding. I told them via my mouth of my current location.

"Beside the school building near it, in a place where it's hard for others to see us, I want to meet you there in 10 minutes".

Such a short reply came back.

"Sorry but I have some business to take care of right now. Is 20 minutes fine?".

".....fine".

The call ended. It won't take longer than 5 minutes to reach the designated meeting spot but I had postponed it.

For now, in the 15 minutes I have in between I should finish the business I still have left.

Underneath the winter sky, there's someone waiting for me while freezing away.

"If you keep on hiding there, you'll catch a cold".

I called out to the person hiding behind the trees and the bushes.

However, no reply was forthcoming.

"I have something to do afterwards. Is it ok if I leave you behind?".

I called out again.

When I did, perhaps she had a half-hearted idea, but without showing herself, only her voice reached me.

".....since when did you notice?".

"From the very beginning, you heard Satou was going to confess here right, Karuizawa?".

"N-not really, just a bit".

Even as she tried to deceive me subtly, Karuizawa stood up.

Since she had been hiding in the bushes, some snow had accumulated on her shoulder.

"It's cold".

"What happened to Hirata?".

"I don't know. He probably went back?".

After answering disinterestedly like that, she came out of the dirt and brushed off the dirt and snow on her body. Perhaps it's because she had been lurking the entire time so as to not make a sound, her nose was also red.

"It was cold, wasn't it?".

"Just a bit".

Karuizawa acts tough in a situation where there was no need to act tough. For Karuizawa, there seems to be something she's more worried about than her own freezing self.

"Speaking of which, why did you turn down Satou-san's confession?".

"What do you mean? You said so yourself, going out with someone you don't even like is the lowest".

"That's true but.....one needs to eat the meal set before them is what they say right?".

What is that? Even though she's attempting to use knowledge she'd heard before, she's got it all wrong.

"It's 'rejecting the advances of a woman is a man's shame', isn't it?".

A meal set before one, is used to describe a meal that is ready to be eaten at a moment's notice. And not grasping that for oneself is a man's shame, so that's it's used to describe love affairs.

Of course in Karuizawa's case, she's not saying this with a sexual meaning, she probably means it's strange for me to not go out when the opportunity to do so presented itself.

"For better or for worse, Satou is a normal girl. She would naturally want a normal romance. But, looking at it objectively, do you really think I'm capable of such a normal romance?"

"That is.....slightly difficult to imagine".

It is only because it is Karuizawa, who understands me better than anyone else, that she is able to understand this too.

I, too, long for a normal romance. Being confessed to by a cute girl and leading a bittersweet school life was something I had thought about more than once or twice. However, as expected, it really won't end up being the same romantic pattern that Satou had envisioned. Even if I forced myself into going out with her here, I would only be wasting her time in vain. If she becomes disillusioned with me later, the school life that's been lost won't ever come back.

"Hey, you~. It's not really my place to say but you might have been a bit too mean".

"Mean?"

"Indeed, Kiyotaka's different from the normal boys. And besides, the 'you' that others see normally is just a lie, right?"

"Lie, or rather, it is a fact that I'm not showing them everything".

"That's why you're correct in thinking when you show them your true self, there are girls who would be disillusioned with you. But you know, once you've

fallen in love, there are also times when you no longer care about such things. It's just my onesided prediction, but, I think Satou-san would have accepted Kiyotaka".

"So that's what you mean?".

"That is what I mean. Well, since you've rejected her already, it's all over though. Even though I had just released the Arrow of Cupid. To think it's going to coming back shortly".

"The Arrow of Cupid?".

"Don't mind it. It's no longer relevant anymore".

She grinned and laughed like a little devil.

"Girls get over their feelings quickly so Satou-san will probably fall in love with another boy, right?".

"That is something that can't be helped. Isn't that right?".

"Some~how I can also hear some regret too though".

"Please leave it be. That's my choice".

I did say that, but, there seemed to have been some unconvincing aspects of it left behind in Karuizawa.

"It's too late already but couldn't you have tried going out with her as a test? No?".

That point is correct.

Even if there happened to be a problem at the very end landing point, there was more than enough possibility that things could have gone well. Even if I myself right now don't like Satou as a member of the opposite sex, if I considered her precious to me, I might have come around to liking her.

"Besides, if it's you, you must have realized Satou-san's feelings, right? Inviting you out on a date on Christmas, this is something normal friends would absolutely never do. Giving her your OK for that, didn't you have it in your head that you'd go out with her?"

"As a result of having had the date, I realized I'm not compatible with Satou, can't you interpret it that way?"

"That.....might be the case. But from what I could see today, things went well. You seemed to be enjoying yourself too".

"If I have to be honest with you, it's not like I didn't think about going out with Satou at all".

"S-See? As I thought".

"By going out with Satou, I might have been able to experience various things".

Perhaps she felt uncomfortable with those words of mine, but she showed me a slightly angry expression.

"What do you mean, various?"

"It's the destination that lovers would end up arriving at. That's what it means".

I tried to tell her as mildly as I could. Naturally, Karuizawa also understands the meaning of it.

"Huh!? You, you were intending on going out with her for such a scummy reason!?"

"Haven't you ever thought about wanting to do it?"

"I-I don't know! It's also a completely unknown world for me too!"

"Then, haven't you ever thought about jumping out into that unknown world?"

"That is-----that is, I mean, ultimately doesn't it depend on your companion?"

".....well, I don't imagine just anyone would do".

I tried imagining it but of course, one would want a companion that's as good as possible.

"Right!?".

"But I had no complaints in particular if it was Satou".

"Muu.....t-then why did you reject Satou-san's confession? You could have experienced that unknown world you spoke of!".

"Don't torture me so angrily".

"I'm not angry!".

If you ask 100 people, 100 people would answer that right now, Karuizawa is angry.

Of course, I don't even have to think about why she's angry.

"If I had chosen to go out with Satou.....would you have been beside me right now?".

"Ehh?".

"That is the main reason why I did not choose Satou".

Not having comprehended it, Karuizawa thinks about the meaning behind those words. Indeed, during that confession choosing to go out with Satou would have led greatly to an enjoyable school life for me. I would've made a lover, and I would have shared happy moments and difficult moments together with her. And I would have deepened my relationship with her. Students all around the world should have imagined such a sweet future at least once.

However, this is only if me going out with Satou would not impact Karuizawa's mental state at all. To choose your special partner, is in other words, to make a choice. If I chose Satou here, it would have become extremely difficult for me to make use of Karuizawa in the future. That is no mere prediction, as a matter of

fact, just like this Karuizawa is drawing closer to me. If I had chosen Satou, Karuizawa would have become more wary of me.

The incident on the rooftop was certainly a massive turning point for Karuizawa. The trust Karuizawa has in me soared, and it's no longer an exaggeration to say that she will never betray me from now on. Ryuen or Sakayanagi, or even if an existence like Nagumo were to draw close to her, Karuizawa won't crumble anymore. However, the only exception to that would be a case like this one.

'A replacement for me'. An existence like that. Perhaps I'm no longer needed, such anxieties would be born in her. As a result, she'd claim she could do things she couldn't do, she'd become fearful and the fear that the things she could do would no longer be possible would also be born. At such a time, it would be suitable to say that Karuizawa's charm would drop by half. I had misgivings about that.

Of course, if Satou had possessed such outstanding talent that she could've been a replacement for Karuizawa, it would have been a different matter. Setting Satou as my main, and using Karuizawa as my sub. That option would have been available. But thanks to our contact today, I have this conviction once again.

Satou cannot possibly replace Karuizawa.

In regards to fundamental thinking and mental aspects, I can safely say she is far from reaching Karuizawa. Miraculously enough, that fact was strongly exposed on the very first date.

Disguising the double date they had set up as a coincidence, and compared to Karuizawa who is still calmly continuing to hide that fact, on a great many occasions Satou had been restless, and in contrast, there were times when she was also too calm. And the decisive blow occurred when Nagumo and I

confronted each other. Karuizawa took action immediately while Satou was divided on it and unable to even join in.

In case of an emergency, that aspect of hers could make a huge difference. From now on, there are 3 problems I will be unable to avoid. The problem with the student council can ultimately be ignored but I cannot do the same against Sakayanagi and my father.

If those two go on a rampage, my position would easily make a complete change once or twice over proportionately. Until I can eliminate that threat completely, I need to make Karuizawa work smoothly for me. Besides, I'm also worried about the movements of Chabashira and Chairman Sakayanagi. I doubt the teachers' side would do something careless like that but now that I can see the background, they are also targets of my surveillance now.

In that sense too, the existence known as Karuizawa Kei is indispensable to me. Even the Chairman, who is seen as being overwhelmingly powerful by the students, can be socially destroyed through the use of Karuizawa as a honey trap. Well, suitability and unsuitability will also play a role but Karuizawa probably won't be able to cope with sexual matters like that. In any case, Karuizawa is highly versatile.

"I've been thinking it might be like that vaguely but Kiyotaka only sees people as tools, right?"

"That's not my intention".

I answered with that but that could not possibly reach Karuizawa, who I've used many times over and over as a tool until now.

"Hey---, this is a simple question but have you ever come to love someone before?"

"Up until now, never".

I do think that I'd like to love someone. It's just that sort of opportunity won't

occur by pure chance.

-----Or.

It's just in my heart, there was no such thing as an 'awakening of love' in the first place. Boys and girls, I do understand the biological difference between them but everything beyond that is pitch black for me.

In the White Room, that was a matter of common sense.

".....ultimately.....".

"What?".

"No, nothing".

Ultimately, even after leaving the White Room, perhaps I'm still stuck in the White Room. We never fail to make preparations to defend ourselves at all times in there. Even though in a proper student's life, such things are unnecessary.

Enjoying the date honestly and going out with Satou, that should have been an obvious future too. But I cannot draw such a future on a canvas. In response to the traps from various different opponents, I have been moving to secure various insurances for that off chance.

No matter what happens to someone else, as long as in the end, you win, that's fine.....this sort of fundamental mindset is something I won't be able to throw away until the day I die.

As I started walking, Karuizawa started walking too with a delay. Never lining up beside me, yet still keeping a distance where we could hold a conversation. Even if someone were to see us, it was at a miraculous distance where we could dress it up as a coincidence.

"Ahh. Even though I put in effort the whole day for Satou-san's sake, it turned out to be useless---".

It was a behavior that makes it hard to believe that just a few days ago, she was put through something horrible on that rooftop.

"Even though something like that happened just a while ago, you sure got back up on your feet, Karuizawa".

".....I haven't been flashily bullied like that in many years".

"Should I say the experience was different? Indeed, ever since I reached elementary school, was it?"

Long-term bullying. She was finally released from that. To have become this nimble, enjoying high school life like this could be said to be a natural gift.

However, Karuizawa made a slightly mysterious face as she listened to me talk now.

But perhaps she was able to understand immediately, she became convinced as she opened her mouth.

"Ahh....I see. It's like that right? Sorry, Kiyotaka, I may have lied a bit".

Fuu, as though she were convinced about something, Karuizawa nodded.

"Lie?".

"That thing I told Yousuke-kun about having been bullied for 9 years. That was a lie. You know, rather than just say I was only bullied during middle school, telling him I was bullied ever since elementary school makes it easier for me to get him to save me, I thought that. Even though the environment changed, the bullying continued, if he were to learn about that, perhaps he might think the same thing might happen at high school too, right?".

Lightly laughing, she stuck out her tongue.

So that's how it is. A lie so that she could properly make use of Hirata. To think that far when using someone, it showed Karuizawa's determination.

"More like.....for having incited Manabe and the others. Are you not going

to apologize again?".

"Now that you put it that way, that's right. Thanks to the date, I had thoroughly forgotten all about that".

"Also, that. Even though you told me you won't be contacting me anymore, you contacted me and relied on me. That too, I feel like you haven't followed up enough on that?".

"I withdraw the thing I said about not contacting you anymore. The obstacles have been removed, after all. If it's ok with you, please let me apologize next time".

"It doesn't feel like your heart is in it at all, though. I won't be expecting anything beforehand so apologize now"

"Now? How?".

"I've told you quite a lot of things, so let me hear something in return too Kiyotaka".

"About what?".

"Today in the afternoon, President Nagumo called out to you, didn't he? What's up with that?".

For Karuizawa, she may have been as worried about this as she was about the matter with Satou.

To think what she requested for an apology would be about the student council.

"You have it tough too. I don't know for what reason you ran seriously in the relay at the sports festival but I feel like more and more people are catching onto the truth".

"I'll put an end to that too. Fortunately, compared to how we started out, the unity of the class has grown stronger. Even if I don't do something, there should be no problems now".

"That's true but, that sort of thinking isn't like you. If we're talking about unity, Class B is far superior to us. I don't think we can beat them in that regard though?".

Saying that, Karuizawa continued.

"Leaving aside the strengthening of unity, it's just you want to get away from all this right?".

"As expected, you've answered correctly".

Class D is still under development. It would lose to both Class A and Class B. However, I have no intention at all of babysitting them until they can win.

"But during the sports festival, just because you stood out a bit, you attracted that much attention? Isn't it unnatural?".

It seems she wishes to say it's strange for me to have attracted the attention of Nagumo Miyabi just because I happened to be fast. If it's Karuizawa, even if I explained to her right now, there would be no problem.

No, on the contrary, I should speak to her about this. It was something I had wanted to cut in with so it saves me time and effort.

"What about the fact that Horikita from our class and the former student council president are siblings?".

"Some~how I think I've grasped it. Isn't it like that? I'm just on that sort of level though. Speaking of which during the relay, the student council president.....no, it's hard to understand unless I add former.....and you started at the same time right? Kiyotaka's an acquaintance, right?".

"Yeah. Through my connection with his sister. And I've been drawing various sorts of attention from the brother's side".

"So that means he knows your real face under that mask you're hiding behind?".

"Behind the mask, huh? What he knows is only the surface. In this school, there is no other person who knows me as deeply as you do".

"...hmmm. It doesn't really make me feel happy or anything though".

That was how Karuizawa answered, but it didn't seem to me as though she was as dissatisfied as she said. To know the secrets of others, is a heavy case for the person in question too but it's not uncommon for people to think of themselves as being special too. Looking at it from Karuizawa's perspective, the fact that she knows both the secret she herself holds and my secret would be stuck in her heart.

"The title of former student council president can be useful in various ways, after all. I'm slightly indebted to him too in the rooftop matter".

When I had sent Karuizawa down from the rooftop ahead of me, she should have met the former student council president who was standing by.

"Speaking of which.....yeah, I met him back then".

"In a similar way, I'm being pushed by the other party too to return the favor".

"So does that have something to do with the fact that you're drawing attention from President Nagumo?".

"The older Horikita and Nagumo have a confrontational relationship with each other. If I have to put it mildly, a rivalry. The fact that the older Horikita had been talking to me is probably something Nagumo didn't like. It seemed like he was raring for a fight during the relay too".

"Some~how this is complicated. So it means you barged in between those two's fight?".

Now with this, the reason why Nagumo's been getting involved with me should have been conveyed to her.

But the real question is from now on.

"Because of that too, I was asked by the older Horikita to lend him a hand. It seems like he wants to drag Nagumo down from the throne of student council president".

".....could it be, he entrusted that role to Kiyotaka?".

"Isn't it troublesome?".

"But, you're about the only one who could do something against that amazing student council president".

"So you think I can do something?".

"If you can't do it, then no one else is capable of stopping him too right?".

Before I had realized, her evaluation of me had gone up quite a bit.

No matter how humbly I try to say it, Karuizawa won't even buy it one bit.

"By the way, since it's already part of the conversation's flow I'll say it but I'm going to be meeting a 2nd year now".

"A 2nd year? Who?".

"I wonder. The identity is still a mystery. The other side too, was unable to confirm that it's me. It's just, the only thing that's confirmed is that they're a student from amongst the 2nd years who doesn't think too highly of Nagumo".

"Heh.....am I getting in your way?".

"If you want to be present, I don't particularly mind if you're there too. What'll you do?".

I'll at least try and confirm whether or not she'll be tagging along.

".....I'll come".

After hesitating for a bit, Karuizawa answered as such. Hearing that word from her, I switched off my phone. Then, the two of us moved towards the school building that was told over the phone.

Epilogue: The Arrow's Destination

This day, Christmas. Students who have their club activities have already left the school and are on their way back. Even if someone were to pass me by, it would probably be a teacher. No, even that should be seen as being very unlikely. In this school there were no lights on that could be considered lighting.

"It's cold. Are they not here yet?"

"It's already supposed to be the scheduled time though".

20 minutes have already passed since the promised meeting time. And there was still no sign of anyone in the vicinity.

"After calling us out they're late? They're quite bold".

"Perhaps, by being late they're scouting out our situation?"

"What's up with that? Isn't that being unfair? Just confirming Kiyotaka's identity like that and going back?"

"They'd probably like to do just that too, but that's probably impossible".

I think with a fair degree of certainty, they will come into contact with us. However, I'd like some spice here to ensure that 'fair degree' becomes truly certain. That is the presence of Karuizawa beside me. If I happened to show up alone in this unpopular location, it would allow them to ascertain that I am the cooperator. However, today is Christmas. Even though it's small, there is still the possibility that we are just an unrelated couple trying to get some alone time, just the two of us, and happened to come here together.

Even if they thought of hiding themselves and contacting me via phone through an unknown number, my phone's battery has already been run dry. In other words, if they wished to confirm my identity, they would need to directly call out to me themselves. As Karuizawa and I stood side by side underneath the freezing sky and patiently waited, a single student approached us.

I recalled that student.

The moment our eyes met, I immediately understood that this was the person I spoke with on the phone. It was just unexpected.....is how I should put it. It was such a person. It wasn't like they called out to us yet. There was also the possibility that they just happened to be here on their own. Of course, that increasingly unlikely probability was immediately rejected.

"I've kept you waiting".

"I just arrived here too, Vice-President Kiriya".

In the instant I called out that name, he seemed surprised but instantly he resumed his serious expression. First let's see the attitude the other side will take.

"It looks like you've already gathered information on the student council to a certain extent. If I recall your name is.....Ayanokouji was it?".

It's not strange even if Kiriya, who was beside Nagumo during our conversation with him today, happened to remember my name.

"I never expected that the one bearing his fangs towards President Nagumo would be his own Vice-President".

"Before we talk about that, I'd like to ask one thing".

Using his hands to block my words, he directed his gaze towards Karuizawa.

"Who is that student over there? I didn't hear about her earlier".

"She's my trustworthy partner".

Karuizawa seemed slightly excited at that, but soon stiffened her expression.

"Trustworthy huh.....a situation where I have no other choice but to trust a 1st year is a pathetic one".

Even after seeing the irregular here, Karuizawa, Kiriya still chose to show himself without attempting to hide. It's either proof that he's simply just that dissatisfied with the Nagumo administration or that he simply believes that much in the older Horikita.

"Then shall we get right down to business? I'd like to avoid drawing this conversation out".

"Likewise. I feel like I'm about to catch a cold out here".

"In the first place, Nagumo and I never saw things eye-to-eye. The fact that I joined the student council too, was because I idolized the existence of Horikita-senpai. As a senpai from the same Class A. Of course, now it's former Class A for me though".

The fact that Kiriyaama had been defeated by Nagumo and fell to Class B. If I assume the fact that he joined the student council too was due to the older Horikita's influence, it's not strange that he's still managed to keep his seat as Vice-President.

On the contrary, I'm more surprised at Nagumo who's kept Kiriyaama, who had opposed him, as Vice-President.

"I had wanted to prevent Nagumo from assuming the office of the student council president, but that was an impossible task, it had long since become beyond the scope of my power. It's a pathetic story".

"The story about President Nagumo having brought together the entire 2nd year student body as his allies, how much of that is true?".

"Almost all of it's real. Naturally, there are those on the inside who aren't exactly satisfied with him but not enough to cast a vote of opposition against him. They've resigned themselves to just obeying him".

"Hey, Kiyotaka. I get the part about uniting the class but is it even possible to make allies out of other classes? Aren't we all competing while aiming for Class A?".

"I'm sure Vice-President Kiriyaama will explain that part".

".....Nagumo's promised us reforms. Ones that surpass the boundaries between classes, he's declared that students with the capability to do so will be pulled up to Class A. As a result of the factional warfare in the class that followed, there are many students dissatisfied at having sunk down to the lower classes".

Towards Karuizawa who slightly tilted her head at that, I added.

"If I have to put it simply, he means types like Horikita and Yukimura".

"I see".

If it's on their own, they surely would've been able to rise to Class A, students who think that way can be made allies of even across classes.

"But that alone is not enough, right? There are also plenty of students from the lower classes that lack any kind of capability".

"If you believe Nagumo's words, every student will be given their own chance, it seems. The details of that, even I don't know".

"Isn't that like suspicious?".

"Even if it's suspicious, there's no other option but to go with that. The classes underneath B are already in crisis, since the class point gap between their class and Class A has already been clearly widened".

The fact that Nagumo made allies out of all the 2nd years, I felt like I understand now more or less. But if that is indeed the case, the presence of Kiriya would become incomprehensible to me.

"Shouldn't Vice-President Kiriya also bet on that 'chance' then? If you fought against the student council president and lost, that in itself would prevent you from returning to Class A, wouldn't it?".

"If there really is such a 'chance' that might have been an option too. However, I don't believe Nagumo will really offer that kind of 'chance' to everyone. There's no way he would do that. If graduation from Class A is guaranteed and the tables are then turned on him, he wouldn't be able to take it all back then".

So that's his reason for standing up against Nagumo.

"The moment Nagumo assumed the seat of student council president, did you not think about leaving the student council?".

"Normally one wouldn't feel like working under a person they are opposing, right?".

"If I left, what would happen? If I leave, Nagumo will only get that much cockier. If that's the case, then at least I can get into bed with him and collect information that way, and find a gap is what I thought. I believed if I gave

Horikita-senpai that information, it would surely be useful to him".

Even as he spoke frankly, Vice-President Kiriya allows his frustration to ooze through.

"Letting the traditions of this school be lost just like this, standing beside him and being able to do nothing except grit my teeth, do you understand how miserable I feel?".

Unfortunately I don't understand. Kiriya too, from the start, probably did not think I would sympathize with him.

"There's no way you'd understand huh.....amongst 1st year students like you, there's probably not a single student who's like Nagumo".

Even though we haven't even heard the full story yet, Kiriya continued on and on with his talk.

"But it's not like you guys are completely unrelated. Right now, Nagumo is still directing his caution towards Horikita-senpai and the 3rd years. Because if he gives them an opening, they are an existence that could threaten his position. But once they graduate that will be gone too, and once that happens, his next targets will undoubtedly be you 1st years".

"Even if you say that, is it even possible for us to get entangled with senior students like that?".

Unable to understand why we would be targeted like that, Kiriya tilts her head.

"For students who don't fall in line, he will deal out merciless punishments. That is Nagumo's way of doing things".

"What do you mean by that?".

"Even if you're a 1st year, if you bear your fangs against Nagumo, it would mean you'll be harassed".

"Then he's the worst student council president".

However, there is also the possibility that one will receive privileges by obeying him. Since the students who had been Nagumo's rivals for 2 years had fallen in line and are obeying him, then he must possess a fair degree of

competency and persuasive ability.

"Bearing fangs or whatever, isn't it usually uncommon to get involved with the student council president?"

"That was the case up until the 2nd semester. From this point onwards, our opportunities to interact with senior students will steadily increase. For the whole year, starting from the 3rd semester, a special exam is held in which 1st years up to the 3rd years will all be together. A similar thing to that will be repeated. Just like how it was for us last year. In other words, between the 1st years and the 2nd years, and depending on the situation, you might even have to fight against the 3rd years".

In other words, if things go according to schedule, in January we will be entangled with senior students who we possess little knowledge of. In the sports festival, there was an exchange where the school years overlapped but there were barely any opportunities to directly interact with them.

"It's very likely that with that timing, Nagumo will narrow down individual threats from amongst the 1st years".

Individual threats, in other words, students who might end up threatening his position. If that's the case, on that battlefield, I'd like to get it over with without attracting any attention.

It's unfortunate that I feel as though I'm already in a situation where that wish won't be fulfilled.

"Then the contents of last year's exam?"

"Probably has nothing to do with this year's special exam. The majority of special exams are carried out so as to be wildly different every year. It won't come in handy".

"Even so, I feel like it would be better for me to know about it, it may prove advantageous to me".

"That may be so. But, unfortunately I cannot answer that. Even if you're the student that Horikita-senpai has nominated, I cannot come into conflict with the rules of this school. If this fact were to be revealed, I'd have to be prepared for expulsion. I cannot break this taboo. And I have no intention of breaking it".

More so if he's from the Horikita faction which holds the rules created by this school in high esteem.

"I sure have a troublesome senpai".

I voiced my honest feelings.

"In any case, the number of ways to drag Nagumo down from his student council president seat are limited. I don't even need to say it, but expelling him is the most surefire way, but reality isn't that convenient. Then next would be to make the fact that he is not qualified to serve as president into public knowledge and forcibly drag him out of office. If he's no longer the student council president, from amongst the 2nd years students willing to wash their hands of Nagumo will surely appear and there would be no effect on you 1st years and the newcomers that'll be enrolling next year".

In short, I don't know what kind of student Nagumo Miyabi might be. Even if I ask Karuizawa right next to me, she would probably repeat that same impression. It's just that we haven't had any exchanges with the other school years to that extent that we could not make a decision. Someone who's abnormally lifted up by his surroundings and cautious as well as being respected and envied by Hirata. I can only conclude that he's no ordinary student.

Originally, it would have been most desirable to find students from amongst the 2nd years who share the same opinion as Kiriya and topple Nagumo that way. Well, since that's no longer possible it just means trouble came around to the 1st years as well.

"Getting him expelled or dragging him out of office, this is all just a bunch of dangerous talk, isn't it?".

"Even when a troublesome enemy is right in your sights, you won't resort to such measures?".

"I've never even once thought of it".

Beside me, Karuizawa for a moment gazed at me in suspicion but I ignored her.

"Then are you going to let me see you perform a frontal attack? If you can

manipulate Nagumo into stepping down as student council president on his own then that's the best outcome but I don't even need to tell you how difficult that will be".

This student known as Kiriya, I don't know how far I can trust him. Judging from the attitude he's taking towards Nagumo there's no mistaking that he definitely harbors negative emotions, hatred, towards him. But I can also see parts of his statements that are worded conveniently for himself. Whether this was done intentionally or not is subject to change but at the present moment I lack enough material to draw a conclusion.

I should not reveal anything beyond showing him the card that is Karuizawa.

"You're free to express your own wishes, but we'll be the ones to decide what to do".

"So it's not that easy to trust me, is that it?".

Naturally, Kiriya also ended up noticing our distrust.

"I too, think I have overacted. There's no need for me to shoulder the responsibility of not being able to stop Nagumo but I just couldn't bring myself to let my kouhais see the same hell. Those are my genuine thoughts".

So he's looking out for his kouhais, huh. This is hard to believe all of a sudden. It's just that he's relying on the 1st years reluctantly because there are no human resources capable of taking down Nagumo amongst the 2nd years. He feels responsibility for not being able to stop him. I was wondering what he was going to say but this time it's for his kouhais, huh?

Compared to this, it would still have given him more credibility if he had told us he hopes to return to Class A by eliminating Nagumo.

I do suppose hiding the ugly truth and playing the saint is also human nature.

"How you perceive this is up to you to decide but just remember one thing. The students who make an enemy out of Nagumo have all been driven to expulsion without fail".

"Then, I feel like it would be best if I did not make an enemy out of the student council president".

Among the students who have been expelled up until now, there should have been those who boldly resisted and attempted to take down Nagumo. However, as a result, the buds of their objections were plucked and they were driven to expulsion.

If that's the case, I wonder if the best option here would be to get through this without either being liked by him or hated by him.

That was the entirely honest impression I had after the conversation with Kiriya.

"...so you won't cooperate?"

"I will cooperate. I also have my own circumstances that prevent me from backing down, you see".

"Fine, then. Either way, Nagumo's already begun to direct his attention towards you. And besides, in the not too distant future, even if you don't want to, you'll end up finding out just what kind of person he is. From now on too, I will leak information about Nagumo and his actions to you. Of course, as long as it's within the range of the rules. After that the decision is up to you".

The contents of that, whether I use them to let him live or kill him off, is up to me, is what he means to say. Kiriya also seemed to have sensed that I was not into it beyond what he expected and almost seemed as though he would have given up halfway through. Even though he will provide me with information, it seems as though he intends on avoiding putting excessive amounts of expectations on me.

"To be perfectly blunt, the amount of impression you give off amounts to nothing. If it weren't for that relay with Horikita-senpai during the sports festival, I would probably not be here formally requesting your cooperation. As a matter of fact, the very reason Nagumo has begun to pay attention to you is also because of that relay".

That would be the one and only 'truth' that made Kiriya make his move. If I had known about Nagumo beforehand, I too, would not have done something that conspicuous during the relay. That choice has led me to face Kiriya like this now.

"Should I ever deem you unworthy of passing information onto, I will immediately withdraw from this".

"If you don't do that, would it mean Kiriyaama-senpai would be in danger?".

In response to that question from Karuizawa, Kiriyaama did not say a word in response and silently nodded. He must be dissatisfied, this is probably the current power balance between Nagumo and Kiriyaama.

"And one more thing, from now on I will never meet directly with you in-person anymore. I will create a random mail account and keep in touch that way".

I'm also thankful for that. Communication via free mail is the best.

"And then.....by any chance, should my collusion with you be discovered by Nagumo due to your inaptitude, I'll have you understand what will happen".

He didn't say it out loud, but it probably meant he'd be taking me down with him. If there was a 1st year who happened to be making an effort to topple Nagumo, then Nagumo would go after them. Having finished saying what he had wanted to say, Kiriyaama quickly left.

"Don't you think from start to finish, there was a bad feeling to this?".

"I suppose so".

It might just mean that Kiriyaama simply cannot afford to relax.

After the conclusion of our conversation with Kiriyaama, we were finally on our way back. On that way back, Karuizawa who was walking behind me called out.

"It's like this developed way beyond my expectations".

"What do you think? About what Vice-President Kiriyaama said earlier?".

"There's no way I'd know anything about that. It might be because I still don't know why he hates President Nagumo to that extent".

Those thoughts of Karuizawa, resemble my own thoughts. A wise person would not draw any closer.....might be true. In order to secure the older Horikita as an ally, I had considered temporarily making Nagumo into my enemy but despite everything I still felt as though that choice was not the right call.

It's just sadly enough, thanks to me amusing myself during the relay against the older Horikita at the sports festival, Nagumo ended up fixing his interest on me. Of course, if I make Nagumo think that is simply his groundless fear, he would soon enough forget about me, but depending on the situation he may also move to get rid of me. If I take the word of my surroundings at face value, Nagumo will never tolerate the existence of his enemies.

"By the way. What was that stuff earlier.....that partner thing".

"Did you not like it?".

"If you onesidedly decide to make me your partner, it can't be helped even if I dislike it right?".

"Then shall I cancel it?".

".....if you want me to become your official partner, there's an appropriate attitude and sincerity you should be having right?".

"Can you explain to me in detail about that attitude and sincerity?".

"Money?".

"Oi".

"I'm just joking. Kiyotaka seems like the person who'd be in a bind over merely lending me points after all".

I wasn't expecting anything, Karuizawa said something like that.

Indeed right now, due to the matter of the "target" Karuizawa possesses those private points.

"Hey more importantly, is Horikita-san fine with this? If we're talking about Kiyotaka's partner, it's her right?".

"She's just like a neighbor to me. She's nothing more and nothing less".

I've already lost count of how many times I've repeated this to other people.

"Then it means I'm the only one you've acknowledged?".

"It is true that you have the ability".

".....I, I suppose".

Of course it's not like Horikita lacks the ability. But in her case, I'd like her to take a different path, I'd like her to develop her character as a leader. And in time, Hirata and Karuizawa will become partners to support Horikita. Eventually, Class D will come to have what can be considered a strong lineup, I went ahead and imagined such. Ultimately whether it ends up becoming that or not can be said to depend on Horikita's competency.

"Since it can't be helped then, I'll become your partner for you".

Of course, up until now she had been carrying out her tasks suitably but here once again, she confirms her commitment.

"If I follow you, I might get your favour".

"That.....is something you're better off not expecting I think".

If I had to say, it's far more likely that she'll suffer damage.

"You may be marked as an enemy alongside me, you know".

"You mean, by the student council president?".

"He's the likeliest one".

"I mean, even if we make an enemy out of President Nagumo, if it's Kiyotaka you should be able to do something right?".

"As far as physical strength and academic quality is concerned, I'm sure I won't lose to him".

"As expected. Pretty good".

Karuizawa says that with a naughty grin.

"However, when it comes to a battle where the rules of this school are applied, there are no absolutes. If he uses something like a suicide bombing strategy with the use of a sacrifice, he may be able to deal out the defeat of expulsion against us".

"Suicide bombing strategy?".

"Well, you can think of it as an extension of the incident where Sudou quarreled with Ishizaki and the others from Class C. If they had been in cahoots with the student council president who presided over as the judge, the

outcome would have been massively different".

And besides, if it had been elevated from a simple incident of violence, expulsion might have occurred.

"Umm, I don't really get it. That incident, I wasn't interested in it at all so".

".....I see. Then please don't mind it. In any case, regardless of its desirability to 'expel someone' in itself is a relatively simple task".

Naturally, that is the case excluding the sacrifices that would need to be paid for that to occur.

"So it means if he no longer cares about keeping up pretenses, Kiyotaka would also be in danger then".

For now since she had arrived at a correct answer I'll leave it at that.

"That's what it means".

No matter how much you tighten your security, there is always a way to break through. Just like that, the enemy's attack, too, cannot be blocked with a 100% certainty. The things needed to block this attack even a little are sagacity and a cooperator.

"If it comes down to that, I'll save you".

"What a heartening partner".

"Do you genuinely mean that?".

"Yeah".

"I-I see. More importantly Kiyotaka, what kind of middle school student were you? There's absolutely no way you were normal".

"I may just be your average run-of-the-mill middle school student, you know".

"No way, no way. If someone like you were normal, the whole world's definition of normal will be overturned".

Karuizawa swung her hands intensely from left to right while completely denying it.

"You're smart and strong in fights too, but normally you're very quiet. There

are places where you can be a little naive about the world. And honestly, what you're doing is messed up".

"Then, from your perspective, what kind of middle school student do you think I was?".

"I'm asking you that because I don't know".

As if complaining, she pouts.

"A hypothesis will do".

Since I had come to feel like asking, I tried asking her.

"Uuuu~mmm...".

Perhaps she had no immediate answer to give, but Karuizawa crossed her arms and tilted her head.

"If this were a manga, I'd say you are an agent who was raised strictly in a facility ever since childhood, or something along those lines. I don't know, I cannot think of anything else except that".

Gazing in a far off direction, Karuizawa answered with an accuracy that was beyond imagination.

"Ahh mou I don't know. I give up. What's the correct answer?".

"That's a secret".

"Uwa---. After asking someone all that, to think you won't even tell me".

"I never said I'd answer in the first place".

"One day, I will absolutely make you tell me".

"It won't be anything interesting so don't keep your hopes up".

"Ahh, it's started snowing".

".....".

Karuizawa didn't seem to be listening to my words. It was only lightly, but it had begun snowing. From midnight until morning, it seems snow's going to accumulate again. After staring up at the sky, once I had returned my gaze to Karuizawa, Karuizawa was staring intently at me.

".....speaking of which, Satou-san gave it to you right? Christmas present".

"I wonder".

"It's useless even if you lie. Could it be, you realized that from the moment we met up?".

From spending time with me for too long, she seems to be gaining more trust from me than necessary. The time I met up with Satou, from the corner the wrapping paper had been sticking out. On a day like this, without any meaning, one wouldn't carry around a present for someone else prior to the date. In all probability, it was something prepared for me, I had felt that.

Probably, if her confession had succeeded, she intended to hand it over to me then.

"How does it feel to have missed that?".

She asked me teasingly but I don't really feel any shock over that.

"Since it's you, you probably haven't been given presents by anyone before right?".

Saying that and without looking me in the eyes, Karuizawa presented me with a small bag. What is this? But asking her that would be too thoughtless.

"It's a Christmas present from me. Gratefully accept it".

"Is it really fine? If I accept it".

"I'm comforting you for not being able to get into a relationship, something like that I guess. Ahh, in return paying me back twice that amount should be fine".

".....that's almost as if you're swindling me".

Just by accepting it, my loss was determined.

"Did you buy it for me?".

"Obviously not. Formally at the very least, Yousuke-kun and I are dating right? That's why at least on the surface, I prepared it for him. I went shopping with the girls who genuinely intended on handing over their Christmas presents and so I made good use of it".

"You don't make any oversights, do you?".

In preparation for her date with Hirata, she bought Hirata a present. No matter how anyone looks at it, there's no doubting the relationship between those two.

"Then wouldn't it have been perfect if you had handed it over to Hirata?".

".....that's right. Normally that would be true".

Slurring her words, Karuizawa cut in.

"Hey Kiyotaka, since we were on the topic of Yousuke-kun I'm sorry but.....".

"Hmm?".

"If I happened to.....break up with Yousuke-kun.....will I no longer be useful?".

She cut in with that.

"Is that the reason why you didn't hand over your present to Hirata?".

"That's, right. Is it unfair of me to be saying this after things didn't work out with Satou-san?".

The thought that I might find Satou more valuable than Karuizawa, that is what Karuizawa is terrified of.

But I cannot say that there is no risk in breaking up with Hirata, not even as lip service. It's obvious that this is an action that would lower the value of the existence known as Karuizawa Kei.

However, this is no longer the case. Even if her value were to decrease, it is now within the range of acceptability.

"You are no longer the old Karuizawa. Even without the existence known as Hirata, there should be no change from your current status. Nothing will change".

"But, me breaking up with Yousuke-kun, was something you didn't think of right?".

The anxieties Karuizawa held, were by no means trivial. In response to that, I continued speaking.

"If Karuizawa's value lied in the continuation of the relationship with Hirata, I would have told you a long time ago to continue your relationship. The fact that I didn't do so is my answer".

If it's Karuizawa and no one else, this statement should have the greatest persuasive power. It's only because she's seen the way I think from up close that she understood the fact that I don't make small mistakes like this.

If Hirata Yousuke happened to be an indispensable piece to me, it was obvious that I would have given the order to protect that. It's just, strictly speaking that wasn't the truth. I had already assumed that Karuizawa would want to break up with Hirata, or more like, I had induced her into wanting it.

Simultaneously both prompting her to be able to act autonomously even after losing Hirata as well as making her switch her parasitic destination over to me was my goal.

In other words, everything so far is going according to plan. Although I did not expect her to barge in on my date with Satou, as a result I was able to connect with Karuizawa even more strongly than before.

"I-I see.....the truth is, I've already been talking about this with Yousuke-kun. Since we're both only in a fake relationship, dragging this out further is no good, like that. I was hesitating".

Saying that, she continued on.

"And besides, the role of Yousuke-kun's girlfriend was something that did promise me influence but for what it's worth, there was also a pressure or something like that strongly affecting me".

Now that the surroundings have stabilized, she wishes to put down that load. Karuizawa declares that. I ignored that cute lie of hers. I don't have much a problem with it, but looking at it from Karuizawa's perspective this is a mistake. If I were in Karuizawa's shoes, just in case I would have left behind insurance. Thinking ahead in the case that I am no longer useful to her, keep Hirata. And in the case that Hirata is no longer useful, keep me. That would have been ideal. Looking before you leap. She had that right to adopt such a strategy.

Karuizawa also understands that. If even so, she rejects such an insurance,

that is also fine. Carrying around all those strategies will also require that much stamina in return, that is also a fact.

If from a small open seam she happens to lose both at the same time, the shock of that time would be more than double. She can simply construct a strategy befitting her stature.

"I'm sure everyone in the class will be surprised when the 3rd semester starts".

"I suppose that's true".

Hirata and Karuizawa are a big couple who are famous even outside of our class. In particular with regards to Hirata, even on that very day a new girlfriend candidate would appear.

"That guy, do you think he'll go out with someone else?".

"Even if you ask me that, I don't know Yousu.....no, it's not like I know Hirata-kun that well either. But in some places, like Kiyotaka, he can be cool. As long as he's pretending to go out with me, he won't be able to date another girl too, and he might not even be that interested in romance".

"Even though you're going back to calling him Hirata, you're still calling me like this?".

"Ahh.....I see. Is it better if I change it back?".

Karuizawa seemed dissatisfied as she looked up.

"That's not what I meant. You're free to call me whatever you like".

Even in our current group, we are not exactly on a first name basis yet but sometimes we do address each other by our first names.

"This might be a good opportunity".

I stopped, and turned back to look at Karuizawa who was walking slightly behind me.

"I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then".

"Tauwa!".

".....tauwa?".

"N-n-n-n-nothing! Why is Kiyotaka also calling me by my first name?".

"If one side uses the surname and the other side uses the first name, it wouldn't feel right".

I couldn't quite grasp the sense of distance between the two of us, it's easy to get the image that's not in focus. If Kei wishes to call me by my first name, then doing the same for her is also natural.

But even if I say that, in regards to our surroundings, the relationship between Ayanokouji and Karuizawa is still as it always has been. That is something that is ubiquitous and unchanged.

"By the way.....just to get things straight. The original proposer that set up the double date was not you, but Satou right?".

"W-What's that supposed to mean, set up?".

Saying that, she tried to deceive me but I could see her impatience at me having suddenly hit the bull's eye.

"Your acting was pretty much spot on but here and there, Satou's actions were strange you see".

"Ahh---....as I thought you realized it? I also thought Satou-san was being suspicious".

It seems Kei too, had something to say about Satou's acting. I put my hand into my pocket. I remembered that I had put a small paper bag in it.

"That's right. I also have a Christmas present for you".

"Ehh? No kidding?".

"I lied".

"Huh? You want to get beaten up?".

"More precisely, it's just a normal present. I think it may be an unnecessary product for you but".

I brought out the paper bag from inside my coat and handed it over to Kei.

".....wait, what's up with that pharmacy bag? Are you mocking me?".

Even as she said that she checked the contents, and peeled off the cellophane tape.

What came out of it was neither a flashy accessory or a cute stuffed toy.

"Cold medicines and a receipt.....?".

"Don't mind the receipt, please throw it away".

"Hey, this receipt has 10:55 am on the 23rd written on it though.....".

Even though I told her not to mind it, Kei turned her gaze towards it.

"On my way back after buying it, I saw you and Satou together at Keyaki Mall. That's how I realized that the double date was a set up from a relatively early stage. I had thought your health would have deteriorated, but it seems that prediction was spectacularly off the mark".

"So.....that means the reason you didn't call me out of worry was.....".

"You weren't wearing a mask either, even from a distance I could see that you were healthy".

"I-If you're this worried about me.....instead of doing things in a roundabout way like this, do things like visiting me earlier or at least giving me a call. You could have confirmed it that way".

"In such a conspicuous dorm, I can't afford to directly visit your room. Contacting you via phone would be an effective means of doing so, but I also took into account that you'd act tough in that case. Because you hate showing your weakness after all".

"B-but then as a result, wouldn't it mean you've wasted money on the cold medicine".

"If it's just the cost of the cold medicine it's pretty cheap. I can also use it on a different occasion as well".

"That.....might be the case.....I seem like such an idiot now for thinking you weren't worried about me at all and holding a grudge".

Saying that, Karuizawa hung her head.

"I was also hugely involved in that incident on the rooftop. I did something

inhuman to the point I cannot complain even if you were to beat me up. Even though it's the next day, if I contacted you unnecessarily, I had thought it would place a burden on your mind and body and that is why I avoided you. It seems like that too, was an unnecessary concern".

Far from me having to make contact, to think it would be Karuizawa who would draw close to me.

"I failed to properly read the strength of your heart".

"T-That's right. Don't underestimate me".

"Towards that Karuizawa with such a strong heart, please allow me to confirm one thing again".

"What is it you want to confirm?".

"From now on too, as much as possible I'd like to avoid doing conspicuous things. But, depending on the situation, I may have to move behind the scenes like I have up until now. At that time, just as you always have, please lend me your power".

"That, isn't it a little late to be saying that? Say it during the whole partner talk earlier".

"That's right I suppose".

After a brief silence, Karuizawa sighed once candidly.

"That's fine, I'll lend you a hand. In exchange, with all your power, protect me ok? If my relationship with Hirata-kun ends, various troublesome things might happen".

"Yeah, I promise".

Beyond the thick clouds, the sun started to set.

The two of us together, stared out at the sun that was no longer visible.

"Christmas is also over, huh".

"If I recall.....Christmas goes from the evening of the 24th until the evening of the 25th, was it?".

That is why lovers mostly spend time together from the night of the 24th until

the evening of the 25th, it is said.

Because it can be considered the greatest bliss for lovers to welcome the moment the 25th starts together. However, in regards to the world, Christmas can be thought to hold slightly special circumstances. It is because the calendar of the church inherited from the Jewish calendar determined it to range from the 24th of December until the 25th of December.

But there are almost no lovers who are aware of Judaism or the birth of Christ. It could be said that in modern times, it has been made into a trendy event by becoming a fad.

This year's Christmas, including the Eve, have been quite busy. Soon the 1st year will end.

"Let's go back, shall we?".

"Yeah".

I start walking. And then, with a slight delay, Kei also starts walking.

In this one year, looking back the one I've gotten the closest to may be Kei who's behind me. This is likely something Kei herself also feels. Before I realized it, she had sublimed into an essential existence for me. To call this friendship, might be being somewhat rude to Kei but.....it's just, from now on, if I can aim for Class A and sever my connection with the student council, at that time we could be friends.....no, I feel like it could change into something beyond that.

SS Chapter: The Cupid Karuizawa

At last it's the 25th, and the double date started. I, in order to faithfully carry out Satou-san's request, in order for a one hit kill, took into my hands the arrow of love. This arrow is a magical arrow which causes anyone it hits to fall in love. Satou-san beside me, in an attempt to get along with Kiyotaka, is coming into contact with him with a sense of distance similar to that of lovers. Looking at those two, I decided to call out to them like a meddlesome lady from the neighborhood.

"Heh....you two are looking pretty good aren't you?".

"R-Really?".

"No matter how you look at it, you guys look like a couple affectionately spending Christmas together, that sort of feeling?".

Firstly I need to tell Kiyotaka that they make a natural matchup. Kiyotaka, who usually thinks of things I wouldn't even be able to comprehend, in regards to romance alone, he doesn't seem like a professional.

He should have no idea how his surroundings view him.

"Hehehe. Isn't it embarrassing, Ayanokouji-kun? They're saying we look like a couple".

".....I suppose so".

Towards those words from Satou-san, Kiyotaka disinterestedly answers. What's 'I suppose so' supposed to mean. Aren't you supposed to be happy deep down inside? Zuzuzu, like that inside me, something dark whispers.

Ahh, no good, no good. The cupid of love does not think such dark thoughts.

"But still, the two of you seriously aren't going out with each other? Could it be the truth is you're already going out~".

Killing my own feelings, I pressed them for an answer vigorously to stir them up.

"N-N-No. Not at all. We still aren't in that kind of relationship!".

Even though she was desperately denying it, Satou-san also checked Kiyotaka's state with a side glance. If he seems happy, it meant it would be material for her to decide that they have chemistry together.

However on the contrary, this blockhead, no matter what's said, never once changed the serious look on his face. He doesn't laugh and neither does he get angry, that makes judgment difficult.

"Really? If you're hiding something you'd better tell me right now, ok?".

Even when I attack repeatedly like that, in response, Kiyotaka gave a reply that was close to outright ignoring us.

I wonder if it was a bad idea to say it in a roundabout manner.

"Speaking of which, Satou-san, you don't have a boyfriend yet right?".

"Y-Yeah".

Since it's come to this, I tried expressing it fairly straightforwardly and yet Kiyotaka still didn't have a good reaction to it. More like, he doesn't even seem to be paying attention to my words. It's almost like he has no awareness that he's on a date. The double date has just begun, maybe we came on too strong with the opening.....

"We'll be enjoying this on our own so the two of you, don't mind us ok?".

For now I decided to leave Satou-san and Kiyotaka to act independently. As I talked with Yousuke-kun, I eavesdropped on the conversation of those two from beside them. By the way, I waited for a fairly long time but the conversation between those two did not start up at all. It may be that Satou-san is also getting nervous, but she did not seem to be able to carve out a topic to discuss. Or it could be that she's expecting the conversation to come from Kiyotaka and is waiting for it. If that's the case it's probably hopeless.

Kiyotaka doesn't seem to have any intention of changing from his usual, sparse self. Ahh mou! That means there's nothing left but for me to do something about it.

I directed a hopeless gaze towards Kiyotaka. And when I did, it seems my

feelings were delivered to him as my gaze immediately met Kiyotaka's.

"You're being rather quiet. So does this mean you're going to keep acting quiet?".

"It's not like I'm acting or anything. I'm not used to dates, I just don't understand the lifestyle of those with topics to discuss".

It's probably that sort of thing.

I felt like from our gaze, I was able to read such feelings from Kiyotaka.

"Satou-san, isn't it just that Ayanokouji-kun doesn't know what to talk about?".

The arrow of love I had let loose. If it hits, it's a magical arrow that will cause one to fall in love. This one arrow, one way or another I'll make sure to hit Kiyotaka with it.

The Heart that Realised

I have made a big decision. Even I think so myself. I can no longer take back the words I have said.

"I'm going to break up with Yousuke-kun".

That was, for Karuizawa Kei, the greatest extreme, an option that would never have been chosen normally.

"I'm sure everyone in the class will be surprised when the 3rd semester starts".

Feeling restless like that, I silently whispered those words.

"I suppose that's true".

It's very likely that almost immediately, a battle between girls over Yousuke-kun will be expected to begin.

"That guy, do you think he'll go out with someone else?".

"Even if you ask me that, I don't know Yousu.....no, it's not like I know Hirata-kun that well either. But in some places, like Kiyotaka, he can be cool. As long as he's pretending to go out with me, he won't be able to date another girl

too, and he might not even be that interested in romance".

Even though it was a lie, we'll still be breaking up. If I mess it up and remain close to him as usual, I'd feel bad for the other girls too. In order to get into the habit from now on, I've decided to no longer call him 'Yousuke-kun' but rather back to 'Hirata-kun'.

"Even though you're going back to calling him Hirata, you're still calling me like this?".

Before I had realized it, I had unconsciously started calling Kiyotaka by his first name. By going back to calling Hirata-kun like that, Kiyotaka threw an obvious question like that at me.

"Ahh.....I see. Is it better if I change it back?".

"That's not what I meant. You're free to call me whatever you like".

After saying that, a short pause, then Kiyotaka continued.

"This might be a good opportunity".

Towards being continued to be called by his first name, Kiyotaka did not show any signs of disapproval. And then, a moment that felt like destiny to me, suddenly occurred.

"I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then".

I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then. I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then. I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then.

Those words reverberated and repeated inside my heart like sacred words.

Hyuruhyuruhyuru~. Just like that, a single arrow fell from the skies. That was, the arrow that was aimed towards Kiyotaka from Satou-san. That arrow was supposed to have flown off somewhere after being released. And that

"Tauwa!".

Of all things, it pierced my heart.

".....tauwa?".

Kiyotaka heard and repeated the mysterious word that flew out of my guts.

"N-n-n-n-nothing! Why is Kiyotaka also calling me by my first name?".

"If one side uses the surname and the other side uses the first name, it wouldn't feel right".

No, no, no. That might be so but! You didn't give any prior notice or anything!

My throbbing, no, soaring heartbeat continued to beat on and on. The sound of that was immense to the point I wondered if Kiyotaka would end up hearing it. And without even minding the panicking me, Kiyotaka continued to talk.

"By the way.....just to get things straight. The original proposer that set up the double date was not you, but Satou right?".

As expected, I should say. Kiyotaka was already aware of the double date trick. Desperately suppressing my feelings, I answered the question.

"W-What's that supposed to mean, set up?".

Just in case, I'll try and deceive him.

"Your acting was pretty much spot on but here and there, Satou's actions were strange you see".

"Ahh---....as I thought you realized it? I also thought Satou-san was being suspicious".

My heart had somehow managed to calm down. Fuu, fuu. It should be fine now.

"That's right. I also have a Christmas present for you".

"Ehh? No kidding?".

As I thought that, my heart once again leaped up and soared.

"I lied".

"Huh? You want to get beaten up?".

After the sudden climb came the nosedive, and I glared at Kiyotaka.

Could it be, am I just being teased?

"More precisely, it's just a normal present. I think it may be an unnecessary product for you but".

".....wait, what's up with that pharmacy bag? Are you mocking me?".

Even if he gives me such a thing, I'm not one bit happy. As I thought that, I received it, and checked the contents. The bag is what it is but the truth is the contents were---I was expecting something like that. What came out from inside it was.

"Cold medicine and a receipt.....?".

Such fleeting expectations were betrayed simply to the point it was almost disappointing. But, I realized something strange. Why give me this?

"Don't mind the receipt, please throw it away".

But by hearing that, it only made me more unnecessarily curious. I pored over the details on the receipt. And then realized my question.

"Hey, this receipt has 10:55 am on the 23rd written on it though.....".

It's not something that was bought today. Normally cold medicine is something you buy only when you need it right away.

"On my way back after buying it, I saw you and Satou together at Keyaki Mall. That's how I realized that the double date was a set up from a relatively early stage. I had thought your health would have deteriorated, but it seems that prediction was spectacularly off the mark".

"So.....that means the reason you didn't call me out of worry was.....".

Does it mean he wasn't being cold towards me, or had forgotten about me?

"You weren't wearing a mask either, even from a distance I could see that you were healthy".

W-what's that mean? I didn't hear anything about that!

"I-If you're this worried about me.....instead of doing things in a roundabout way like this, do things like visiting me earlier or at least giving me a call. You could have confirmed it that way".

"In such a conspicuous dorm, I can't afford to directly visit your room. Contacting you via phone would be an effective means of doing so, but I also took into account that you'd act tough in that case. Because you hate showing

your weakness after all".

What, what, what, what, what is that supposed to mean! I felt the sudden urge to hide my face which was rapidly becoming red.

That day, ever since that incident on the rooftop, that means Kiyotaka's always been worried about me!

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa, mou, aaaaaaaaaa! Inside my heart there was another me who was squealing while running around. There's no more mistaking it. I just have to admit it now. Seriously, seriously, seriously, my heart's seriously been stolen away. The arrow which had pierced my heart. The arrow of love which I could no longer take out. Is this even possible? Is it even fine for me to fall in love with someone who's been partly bullying me? But it's already too late. The power of this arrow is tremendous.

I have, I have towards Kiyotaka-----really, seriously, I've fallen in love with him.

SS Chapter: The Heart that Realised

I have made a big decision. Even I think so myself. I can no longer take back the words I have said.

"I'm going to break up with Yousuke-kun".

That was, for Karuizawa Kei, the greatest extreme, an option that would never have been chosen normally.

"I'm sure everyone in the class will be surprised when the 3rd semester starts".

Feeling restless like that, I silently whispered those words.

"I suppose that's true".

It's very likely that almost immediately, a battle between girls over Yousuke-kun will be expected to begin.

"That guy, do you think he'll go out with someone else?".

"Even if you ask me that, I don't know Yousu.....no, it's not like I know Hirata-kun that well either. But in some places, like Kiyotaka, he can be cool. As long as he's pretending to go out with me, he won't be able to date another girl too, and he might not even be that interested in romance".

Even though it was a lie, we'll still be breaking up. If I mess it up and remain close to him as usual, I'd feel bad for the other girls too. In order to get into the habit from now on, I've decided to no longer call him 'Yousuke-kun' but rather back to 'Hirata-kun'.

"Even though you're going back to calling him Hirata, you're still calling me like this?".

Before I had realized it, I had unconsciously started calling Kiyotaka by his first name. By going back to calling Hirata-kun like that, Kiyotaka threw an obvious question like that at me.

"Ahh.....I see. Is it better if I change it back?"

"That's not what I meant. You're free to call me whatever you like".

After saying that, a short pause, then Kiyotaka continued.

"This might be a good opportunity".

Towards being continued to be called by his first name, Kiyotaka did not show any signs of disapproval. And then, a moment that felt like destiny to me, suddenly occurred.

"I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then".

I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then. I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then. I'll also just be calling you 'Kei' then.

Those words reverberated and repeated inside my heart like sacred words.

Hyuruhyuruhyuru~. Just like that, a single arrow fell from the skies. That was, the arrow that was aimed towards Kiyotaka from Satou-san. That arrow was supposed to have flown off somewhere after being released. And that

"Tauwa!".

Of all things, it pierced my heart.

".....tauwa?".

Kiyotaka heard and repeated the mysterious word that flew out of my guts.

"N-n-n-n-nothing! Why is Kiyotaka also calling me by my first name?"

"If one side uses the surname and the other side uses the first name, it wouldn't feel right".

No, no, no. That might be so but! You didn't give any prior notice or anything!

My throbbing, no, soaring heartbeat continued to beat on and on. The sound of that was immense to the point I wondered if Kiyotaka would end up hearing it. And without even minding the panicking me, Kiyotaka continued to talk.

"By the way.....just to get things straight. The original proposer that set up the double date was not you, but Satou right?"

As expected, I should say. Kiyotaka was already aware of the double date trick. Desperately suppressing my feelings, I answered the question.

"W-What's that supposed to mean, set up?"

Just in case, I'll try and deceive him.

"Your acting was pretty much spot on but here and there, Satou's actions were strange you see".

"Ahh---....as I thought you realized it? I also thought Satou-san was being suspicious".

My heart had somehow managed to calm down. Fuu, fuu. It should be fine now.

"That's right. I also have a Christmas present for you".

"Ehh? No kidding?"

As I thought that, my heart once again leaped up and soared.

"I lied".

"Huh? You want to get beaten up?"

After the sudden climb came the nosedive, and I glared at Kiyotaka.

Could it be, am I just being teased?

"More precisely, it's just a normal present. I think it may be an unnecessary product for you but".

".....wait, what's up with that pharmacy bag? Are you mocking me?".

Even if he gives me such a thing, I'm not one bit happy. As I thought that, I received it, and checked the contents. The bag is what it is but the truth is the contents were---I was expecting something like that. What came out from inside it was.

"Cold medicine and a receipt.....?".

Such fleeting expectations were betrayed simply to the point it was almost disappointing. But, I realized something strange. Why give me this?

"Don't mind the receipt, please throw it away".

But by hearing that, it only made me more unnecessarily curious. I pored over the details on the receipt. And then realized my question.

"Hey, this receipt has 10:55 am on the 23rd written on it though.....".

It's not something that was bought today. Normally cold medicine is something you buy only when you need it right away.

"On my way back after buying it, I saw you and Satou together at Keyaki Mall. That's how I realized that the double date was a set up from a relatively early stage. I had thought your health would have deteriorated, but it seems that prediction was spectacularly off the mark".

"So.....that means the reason you didn't call me out of worry was.....".

Does it mean he wasn't being cold towards me, or had forgotten about me?

"You weren't wearing a mask either, even from a distance I could see that you were healthy".

W-what's that mean? I didn't hear anything about that!

"I-If you're this worried about me.....instead of doing things in a roundabout way like this, do things like visiting me earlier or at least giving me a call. You could have confirmed it that way".

"In such a conspicuous dorm, I can't afford to directly visit your room. Contacting you via phone would be an effective means of doing so, but I also took into account that you'd act tough in that case. Because you hate showing your weakness after all".

What, what, what, what, what is that supposed to mean! I felt the sudden urge to hide my face which was rapidly becoming red.

That day, ever since that incident on the rooftop, that means Kiyotaka's always been worried about me!

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa, mou, aaaaaaaaaa! Inside my heart there was another me who was squealing while running around. There's no more mistaking it. I just have to admit it now. Seriously, seriously, seriously, my heart's seriously been stolen away. The arrow which had pierced my heart. The arrow of love which I could no longer take out. Is this even possible? Is it even fine for me to fall in love with someone who's been partly bullying me? But it's already too late. The power of this arrow is tremendous.

I have, I have towards Kiyotaka-----really, seriously, I've fallen in love with him.

SS Chapter: A Sign of Battle

At night, the New Year's Eve bell declaring the coming of the New Year rang for the 108th time on the television. Apparently it's to cleanse all worldly desires away and to welcome the new year with a purified body. It's a silly story. People won't lose their worldly desires from a farce like this. The more you suppress it, avarice from the core is something that only swells up. There was an incoming call to me from an unregistered, unfamiliar number. Feeling like killing boredom, without thinking anything, I silently pressed the phone's call button.

"Happy New Year. Were you awake?".

A woman's voice. Naturally, a voice I'm familiar with.

"To think you'd call me this early into the new year, Sakayanagi".

"If you wouldn't mind, may I have a bit of your time from now? I'd like to meet you in person".

"Are you asking me out on a date at a time like this? Kuku, it's not like I won't answer you though. Come directly to my room then".

"Then, in 30 minutes, I shall be waiting by the vending machine outside the dorm".

After ignoring my invitation, she sure is continuing to onesidedly talk.

"Fine, I was free either way".

Having finished our brief conversation, I threw my phone onto my bed. There's no need to honestly respond to her but this time, there are some circumstances. Either way, I already understand the contents of what she wants to say, so after confirming that the promised time has passed, I left my room.

Then, slowly, I left the lobby of the dormitory and immediately headed for the vending machine. As I carefreely arrived at the promised location, that woman immediately called out to me. As always, she was carrying her cane around as she welcomed me.

"You're 10 minutes late. I believe I've given you 30 minutes to prepare though".

She spoke that fact calmly without any happiness or anger.

"Kuku. I could have just ignored you though".

"Well, this is fine".

10 minutes was being too lenient. I should have kept her waiting longer in this cold weather.

"But for a late night date, there are quite a bit of onlookers".

Beside Sakayanagi, the figures of Kitou, Hashimoto and a sleepy-looking Kamuro were there.

"Usually this is something that's done as a pair".

"Fufu. I don't have the courage to meet you so late at night when it's just the two of us".

Having received such words of praise I'm thankful for, I drew closer to Sakayanagi.

However, just by drawing closer to a certain extent, Kitou takes a step forward. It was a silent pressure that was telling me not to come any closer. Is he playing at a knight protecting the princess? Kitou's face doesn't befit that of a knight's.

"It appears you've suffered quite the terrible injury. Even now, it seems there are some scars left behind".

"Are you worried about me?".

"So you're not going to deny your injuries then?".

"Deny? It'll just be strange even if I deny them with this face".

It's been a week since I fought Ayanokouji on that rooftop. The swelling and the bruises have gone down quite a bit, but even so, I haven't made a complete recovery yet. It's obvious these injuries aren't something I'd sustain from falling down a flight of stairs. And I don't know where she got wind of this, but it's nothing particularly surprising.

Looking at either me or Ishizaki who both went out with our faces swollen, anyone would be able to immediately tell.

"For someone who holds pride in fighting, you've lost face, Ryuen".

Hashimoto says that while laughing. While courteously pointing out where my drive lies.

"Was it alright for you to go about in such a state?".

"I'm grateful for your concern, but I don't want to be told that by someone whose legs are crippled like you".

"Fufu. That may be the case".

Maybe my provocations were fruitless.

As for Sakayanagi, she probably has something else she wants to hear.

"If you wish, I can tell you all about the extent of the condition of my injuries right here and now".

Sakayanagi's two prized bodyguards, Kitou and Hashimoto, each turn their eyes towards me.

"Even though your subordinates are not present, you're rather bullish".

By subordinate, she probably means Ishizaki or Albert and the others.

"Whether they're here or not doesn't matter. If you look at them as part of my forces, they're not here after all".

I took a step forward. Kitou also takes a step forward. Leaving aside Hashimoto, it seems Kitou has taken a fighting stance. Whatever happens, to be able to move immediately, he's warming up for it.

"Let's stop with the dangerous stuff. No one stands to gain anything from fighting in a place like this".

Hashimoto, as though joining in, said that.

"Shall we get down to business then? The reason I called you out at a time like this is because there is something I would like to ask you directly. It's something that's difficult to ask when there are people around".

Late at night between the end of one year and the start of the next, the rules on the school campus are somewhat different from the rules of the outside world. The convenience store that's normally open for 24 hours is also closed, and there are no stores currently open. There's no one that would go outside at a time like this. Either they've gone to bed already or are watching the welcoming of the new year on the television. This is a situation where we can talk about anything we like, in other words.

"You've fallen from your seat as leader of Class C. I've heard word of that".

"I knew you'd try to confirm that".

"Is that true?".

"If it is, what'll you do?".

"That was a rather quick admission. Unlike your injuries, it's not like we were there at the scene watching".

Sakayanagi stares at me with eyes that were searching for the truth. Until I met Sakayanagi, I had onesidedly reached a single conclusion. There's no way she could possibly know about Ayanokouji.

Who I quarreled with, who I was defeated by. I had thought she wouldn't show much interest towards that.

"Did you think I would have put on airs?"

"I wonder. That may be the case indeed".

However, it's still fishy. Sakayanagi's eyes are that of someone who knows something. She had such a look in her eyes. Ayanokouji did not talk in depth about it but did he already attract Sakayanagi's attention?

If so, then when? There's almost no doubt it was before the incident on the rooftop with me. No, if that's the case, then Sakayanagi should have had a strong interest in Ayanokouji since way back.

But up until now, Sakayanagi showed no signs of it and as a matter of fact, she's trying to investigate it like this. From that bizarre contradiction, I arrived at a single answer.

It means there is a possibility that Ayanokouji and her were acquaintances from way back. If that is indeed the case then what Sakayanagi wants to know right now isn't whether or not I lost.

'It's whether or not I lost to Ayanokouji'

It would be that she wants to know the truth regarding that. It's quite an interesting line of reasoning if I do say so myself, or so I thought, but I'll let that problem be for now.

If such an interesting topic were to be dangled in front of me, it'll cause my instincts to throb.

"Even if you lose to someone, will you conceal that fact, Sakayanagi?"

"I don't know, because for me to lose to someone, cannot possibly happen after all".

That's a Sakayanagi-like screwed up response.

"However, if I happened to lose, at such a time, will I honestly acknowledge it or not, you ask?".

"Kukuku. Because you're prideful if nothing else, after all".

"Pride is important, you know. A life without pride would be boring, wouldn't it?".

"A life of showing off your pride, on the contrary, is the pointless one".

"Hey, couldn't you have confirmed something like this over the phone?".

Kamuro, who had been silent up until now and listening to the conversation, joined in.

"The thing about truth is, you won't know until you meet face-to-face. Especially since he's proficient at telling lies. Over the phone, it would have been difficult to ascertain it".

"Ahh, I see. Then at least get it over with quickly".

The small fries Sakayanagi uses also have it tough. Underneath the freezing sky, Kamuro's body slightly trembled.

"After playing the tyrant, in the end you ended up losing to your subordinate and fell from your seat as leader".

Sakayanagi pretends to ponder over it.

"It's a story that's hard to believe, isn't it?".

"If so then what else could it be?".

"That is something I do not know. That is why I have called you out like this".

"If you meet face-to-face with me, you'll begin to see the truth, huh?".

"I wonder".

She's always trying to sound me out. Well, if you ask me, I have no intention of maneuvering around her every single time over Ayanokouji.

"I have no further intention of doing anything else in this school".

"Oi, oi. That's a joke, right? Are you seriously saying that?"

The one who reacted before Sakayanagi, was Hashimoto.

"There is no need to doubt like that. Due to his contract with Katsuragi-kun, every month, he is guaranteed private points. Ultimately, linking up with Class A is an assured pathway for him so even if he drops out now, it won't be an inconvenience".

"Precisely. I'll be observing your petty fights from above".

"However, there's no guarantee it'll continue to go well though. If an event where you lose a large amount of private points were to occur, your rise to Class A will become doubtful".

She gives a courteous preface, no, explanation. The point is, it's a provocation from Sakayanagi saying she can crush me at any time.

"But please be at ease. First of all, I've decided that I will be thoroughly tormenting Class B. Having you and Class C as my playtime opponents will have to be on a different occasion".

"Do as you please".

Just as Ayanokouji's information said, it appears the brunt of Sakayanagi's attack from now will be focused towards Class B. I have no interest in what'll become of Class A or Class B but as a spectator, I'll have them entertain me.

"If you have no intention of starting a fight here, then I'll be taking my leave".

"It was only for a brief while but I had quite a bit of fun. I thank you for your loser's speech".

I turn my back. However, feeling like I'd tell her something, I stopped walking.

"Sakayanagi, you should also remember that you're not a winner who's guaranteed victory".

"If you're going to teach me defeat then I'll welcome it anytime".

I have no further intention of getting involved in the dispute between classes. However, if she were to challenge me as an individual, then I will crush her. If I didn't need to protect my colleagues in Class C, I wouldn't have to rack my brains over Sakayanagi's strategies every single time.

SS Chapter: Conflict of the Mind

The 23rd which welcomed the first day of the winter vacation. I came to the movie theater, ignoring the couples who were being festive due to Christmas being at hand. Early in the morning, when I saw off Ryuen who was intending on quitting school, I was planning on staying in my room for the whole day. But just a while ago, after receiving mail from that idiot Ishizaki, I changed my mind.

"Ryuen-san changed his mind!".

Along with such a mail, them bragging about how their persuasion had worked was also written. But that's not the case. That guy, Ryuen had hardened his resolve to quit school. It wasn't a situation where mere persuasion from Ishizaki and the others was going to make him change his mind. In other words.....there were other factors besides that.

Something that would make him change his mind. That is probably, something related to Class D's Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. My intuition is telling me that. If I'm in my room, it becomes obvious that I end up anxiously thinking about that, so I desired a time where I could focus on something else entirely.

Remembering that there was a movie I had not seen yet which was almost nearing the end of its screening period, I made reservations for a seat and headed for Keyaki Mall. Just before the screening began, inside the building that was engulfed in darkness, the me who had arrived with that timing, upon reaching my seat, casually rested my arm on the empty armrest. Feeling a sensation of rubbing against cloth, I turned to glance at it.

That was a mistake.

"Geh".

I ended up meeting with the number 1 person I did not want to meet right now in this unexpected place. It was the Ayanokouji who had been occupying my thoughts. He's the man who puts on a dumb face yet is the one manipulating the class from behind the scenes. He's not just smart, he's a surreal existence whose fighting skills are far beyond that of Ryuen and Albert.

"It's a coincidence, huh".

He calls out to me like that.

I really don't want such a coincidental meeting. I felt nauseous and turned my gaze away. Ahh mou, why do I have to come across Ayanokouji? On top of that, he's also alone.

Back during the summer vacation, I remembered the time when I was trapped with Ayanokouji inside an elevator. Ever since then, I had been dancing in the palm of his head, and remembering that, frustration oozes out of me. Not knowing a thing, writing him off as an idiotic student of Class D. In a sense, this situation is similar to that situation back then.

It feels like the two of us are trapped inside a sealed box. Desperately trying to clear up the darkness, I turned my gaze towards the movie that was being screened. But the contents of it barely came into my mind. I did think about just standing up from my seat and leaving, but that would just make it look like I'm running away from him. That alone, I cannot stand. As soon as the movie ends, I'll leave. I made that resolve. As it stands, without anything happening, such a wish of mine, right after this, would collapse at once.